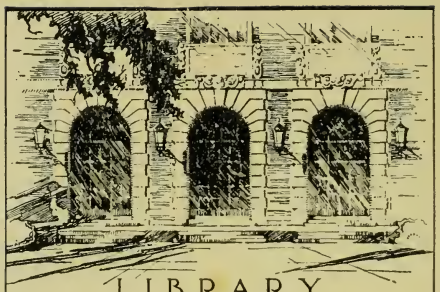

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A ROMANCE OF MODERN LONDON.

A ROMANCE OF MODERN LONDON.

A Novel.

BY

CURTIS YORKE,

AUTHOR OF

'HUSH!' "THE MYSTERY OF BELGRAVE SQUARE," "THE BROWN PORTMANTEAU," "DUDLEY," "THE WILD RUTHVENS," "THAT LITTLE GIRL," &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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A ROMANCE OF MODERN LONDON.

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CHAPTER I.

"ALL UNKNOWING!"

"And should the twilight deepen into night,
And sorrow grow to anguish, be thou strong;
Thou art in God, and nothing can go wrong
That a fresh life-pulse cannot set aright
That thou dost know the darkness, proves the light.
Weep if thou wilt, but weep not thou too long;
Or weep and work, for work will lead to song."

—GEORGE MACDONALD.

WELL, Conrath "pulled through," according to the doctor's predictions, and was soon going about again. As he had heard nothing of his book, had got nothing to do, was considerably in debt, and had been obliged to borrow a ten-pound note from Fenwicke—who, as it happened, could ill afford to lend it—it may be imagined that he was feeling the reverse of cheerful.

About twice a week letters came from Bee —at which, though he kissed them, he smiled sardonically — reminding him that he had promised to "take care of himself," and imploring him to take port-wine, fruits, jellies, strong soups, and various other little trifles which were about as accessible to him just then as the moon and stars. Douglas, we know, had always been a little inclined to be morbid when things went very far wrong; and as his system was necessarily much lowered by his late illness the depression that took possession of him now was well-nigh intolerable. And from his depression was born a dark resolve.

One day towards the end of November, when a damp, marrow-chilling mist seemed to cling like a wet blanket over all visible things, this young man so ill-treated by fortune was crossing St. James's Park. It was late in the afternoon; dusk was already creeping over the city, and deepening into a thick fog. He approached the water, and sat down on one of the mist-bedewed seats—a

most imprudent proceeding for a fellow in his indifferent health, to be sure—but prudence had ceased to be a point with him. In the little light the dying day afforded, one could see that his face wore a look that was both hopeless and reckless. His mouth was firmly set, and very, very sad. He had come to the "last fence"—the very last a man can take in this world.

And what was this, then, that he drew from the breast-pocket of his coat, and regarded with almost feverish longing? Ah, what? It was a way out of his troubles that thousands have taken, and tens of thousands have contemplated.

It meant no more debt, nor anxiety, nor passionate never-to-be-satisfied desire, nor baffled ambition, nor sleepless, care-haunted nights. It meant rest, tranquillity, oblivion. Ah, but *did* it mean all these? Well, at any rate, he thought drearily, the unknown future into which he was about to plunge could not hold anything much worse than the present held. Of course we all think much the same

when we are hard hit, and down on our luck in love and fortune combined. It was fearfully cowardly of him, of course. It was tantamount to confessing that he was not man enough, nor Christian enough, to bear the ills that life had put upon him. If you despise him heartily at this point, I cannot help it. For the matter of that, he despised himself.

He let his eyes stray over the sullen grey surface of the water, fingering absently the while the tiny pistol he held. It was Max Fenwicke's — one the latter had lent him months ago when they were down at Poldornalupe. Max himself was there now — having tried unsuccessfully to get his friend to accompany him.

How cold it was in the silent park, with no sound but the monotonous lapping of the icy water! The would-be suicide shivered, and looked half-wistfully around him. The passers-by were few, and evidently bent on reaching their various destinations as soon as possible. The fog was thickening fast; the trees assumed shapes ghostly and strange in

the growing darkness. Conrath roused himself from the curious lethargy which was fast enwrapping him; his face grew a shade paler; his hand closed more tightly over the deadly little weapon he held. Just for a moment he thought of Bee, and with the thought his heart contracted painfully.

His finger touched the trigger.

Ah! what was that? Footsteps were approaching; and presently two figures loomed indistinctly through the yellowness of the fog. Conrath hastily concealed the pistol, and sat sullenly waiting until they should pass.

It was a girl's voice that came through the chilly stillness.

"Oh, Collins, here we are at the water again," it said, irritably. "We shall never get out of this place."

At the sound of the voice the solitary figure on the seat started violently, and half rose—then sat down again, and pulled his hat nervously over his eyes.

"Let us ask that man on the seat, miss,"

said another voice; "he'll maybe be able to direct us. It's going to be as dark as Egypt in another moment."

Douglas kept his eyes resolutely fixed on the ground, and did not look up as the voice he loved best in all the world said sweetly:

"Can you direct us, please, to the steps at the foot of the——"

Here the speaker broke off suddenly, and exclaimed in a joyful voice:

"Why, Douglas, is it *you?* Oh, I am *so* glad. Now we shall be all right. You did not know me, I suppose, in this dreadful fog. I have been to afternoon service in the Abbey, and very foolishly lingered listening to the music afterwards. When we came out we could hardly see a yard before us, and I'm sure I don't know how long we have been wandering about trying to get out of the park."

Conrath had risen, feeling giddy and sick. As Bee paused, he said half-mechanically:

"Poor child, you must be tired—and cold."

"Oh no, I am warmly wrapped up. But you, Douglas," she added anxiously, "you are shivering. Why, my dear, you look very ill; and you wrote me you were so much better."

"I shall be better—soon," he said in a strange expressionless voice.

She put her little hand through his arm.

"You have taken a chill," she said reproachfully. "How could you be so foolish as to sit here in the cold and damp—and without even an overcoat? Why—any one would imagine you didn't want to get well. I just came in time, I think."

He was silent.

"Why do you look so white and strange, Douglas?" she went on in a voice that was almost a caress. "And why were you sitting there in the fog and darkness? Is anything the matter?"

It was a moment or two before he answered; then he said, speaking seemingly with an effort:

"I—I was worried about things. I came here to—to think."

"Poor old dear," said the girl very gently. "What were you worried about? Tell me, Douglas. You know I always consider myself as your little sister, whatever they may say."

"Oh, I can't tell you," he said, with a half-weary, half-irritable inflection in his voice. "How could you possibly understand?" Then he added remorsefully. "Forgive me, Bee. I am out of sorts to-day, and—and not quite myself."

There was a dead silence after that, except for the muffled tread of their feet on the saturated ground. Quite a long time passed before Bee said thoughtfully:

"It is very strange, Douglas, but last night I dreamt that I saw you sitting just as you were just now—your head bent, your hat drawn over your eyes, and your hands clasped and hanging down before you. And in my dream I cried—because I felt that you were in some great danger, I did not know of what. Then I saw that I had a letter in my hand for you; but when I offered it to you,

you shook your head, and would not take it. And at last you did take it, and opened it, and sprang to your feet with a loud strange cry. And then—I awoke."

Douglas smiled faintly.

"But you have not brought me the letter, you see," he said, letting his eyes rest for a moment upon her small earnest face, which he could hardly see through the thickening fog.

"Perhaps it is waiting for you at home," she made answer. "Who knows? Perhaps some hitherto unknown relation has died and left you all his money." And she laughed gleefully.

He laughed too—but his laugh rang bitter.

"I have only one relation in the world that I know of," he said. "And he is not likely either to die or to leave me any of his money."

"I said an *unknown* relation," was the impressive answer. "However, you will see when you get home. You are going home whenever you leave us, of course? Your

clothes are as damp as they can be; I quite expect to hear of your being laid up again," she added with a motherly little air of solicitude.

He was silent.

"You *will* go home and change your clothes, won't you?" she repeated in an earnest voice.

"No, I am not going home just now," he answered evasively. "I have—something to do first."

"Douglas," she said, and there was a sharp ring of agitation in her pretty pathetic voice —"I am anxious about you, I don't know why. I can't rest to-night unless I know that you are safe at home. Dear Douglas, I may be foolish—but humour me—just this once." And her grey eyes grew heavy with tears.

Douglas pressed the dear little hand closer to his side. Did she know all she asked?

"Very well," he said huskily. "I will do as you wish. I will go home now. I promise."

They were close to her home now, and at

the foot of the steps he paused, and took her hands tightly in his.

Collins stood stolidly waiting.

"Good-bye," Douglas said, in a long half-sobbing breath.

"Good-night," Bee corrected him smilingly. "You will come to see me soon, I know."

"Good-bye," he repeated. And the next moment he had vanished into the fog.

He walked fast until he passed Tottenham Court Road; then his footsteps flagged and grew heavy and uncertain.

As he neared his home a strange excitement took possession of him — an excitement that alternated with an overpowering bodily weakness. When he had let himself in he was trembling so that he had to pause for a minute or two before going any further. Then he mounted the staircase slowly and painfully.

His room was unlit, of course, and there was no fire. He sat down on the nearest chair to get his breath; for the long steep stairs tried him sorely. There is nothing so

intolerable to a strong man as the enforced weakness that tedious convalescence brings. It is worse, far worse, to bear than any pain. Presently he rose, struck a match, and lit the candle.

Then he saw that a letter lay on the table. It bore the name of the firm to which he had sent his book.

He tore open the envelope with shaking fingers. A strange singing was in his ears, the writing seemed to dance before his eyes and for fully a minute its import was lost upon him. Then, with a thickly-beating heart, he read the following :—

"Dear Sir,—

"In regard to the MS. one vol. novel, entitled 'Yesterday!' which you kindly left in our hands recently.

"We have read, and carefully considered the story, and are prepared to make you the following offer for it, should you agree to the terms. We should propose to offer you £500 for the copyright of the MS.—or, if

this arrangement should not meet your views——"

Douglas read no more—then. The letter fell from between his trembling fingers. He sank into a chair, and hid his face on his arms. The sudden reaction—the shock of a relief so intense as to be almost pain — unnerved and unmanned him, and he sobbed like a child.

* * * * *

"Yesterday!" by "Michael Armstrong," was a great success. Reviewers praised it, the public took to it at once, and it "went" like wildfire. In an incredibly short time it had reached its fiftieth edition There was an indescribable pathos about it that touched all hearts, and yet it abounded in quaint, humorous passages that were irresistible. "Michael Armstrong's" name was made. Offers from countless publishers poured in upon him. He could command his own price for his work.

And how he worked! Night and day

almost. At last he tasted the sweets of congenial and well-paid labour.

Nevertheless, he found time to go into the world a little. For he could afford it—now. Of course he was overwhelmed with invitations from all and sundry. Capricious London Society bowed down before the successful author, as it bows down before all success. In the old days at Garth Street, when he was known to the literary world only through his short stories, he had had plenty of invitations too; but his poverty, then, made him proud, and averse to mixing with his fellow-men. So he had refused them all, with the exception of perhaps one in twenty. It was different now.

People said he was a "most interesting young man," and, to romantic damsels, his habitual air of stern gravity made him more interesting still.

Perhaps his moment of dearest triumph was when Bee—her eyes full of happy tears—told him how proud she was of him. He had not told her of his identity with

"Michael Armstrong," and she made the discovery one night at one of Lady Bilberry's little dinners—a dinner given in Douglas's honour.

"Oh, Douglas, how glad and proud I am," murmured Bee to him when he came up to her afterwards in the drawing-room. "If you knew how I have read all your stories, and how I cried and laughed over 'Yesterday!'—never dreaming that 'Michael Armstrong' was my dear old brother Douglas! Why did you never tell me, you unkind boy? You might have trusted me."

He looked at her strangely for a moment or two; then he told her of that night when he had found the letter, as she had laughing predicted. But he did not tell her from what her gentle hand had, all unknowing, saved him.

And she never knew.

In the course of the evening, Mr. Chandleur congratulated him loudly and pompously. It appeared he had always divined "what was in him," and seen his latent talent. So he

flattered him fulsomely, called him his "dear lad," his "clever young friend," his "girl's adopted brother, and childhood's playfellow," etc., etc.

It so happened that at this same dinner Ralph Debenham was one of the guests. He had called upon Douglas several times in Guilford Street — twice before the latter's illness, and once or twice since, but had only on one occasion found him at home. Douglas now shared Fenwicke's rooms in Charles Street, and was making friends fast, as rising men—and women too—invariably do. It is always so, as a certain wise old book tells us:

"*Unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.*"

It is cruel, is it not? A hundredth part of the adulation and praise showered on fortune's favourites would be so thankfully and eagerly received by the struggling, unknown, lonely ones. But no; it is the way of the world

now—as it was nearly nineteen hundred years ago—that those who are starving shall be grudged even the crumbs, and that their more fortunate brethren shall be plied without ceasing with that which sickens them.

Douglas, however, as was only natural, was not yet sickened with the fruits of success. But he bore his honours well, and without assumption. Debenham watched him curiously to-night—not finding it difficult, nevertheless, to identify this grave, rather stately young man, who looked so much at home in his faultless evening-dress, with his shabby, starved-looking clerk of old times. The boy had always been what the man would always be—a gentleman.

"And so, Mr. Conrath, you have really turned out to be an author," Fay Dinwoodie was saying to him in slow contemplative tones —"a successful author! Do you know, I am a little surprised. And I think I am a good deal—disappointed."

"I can understand that you should be

surprised," he said with his grave smile, "but why, if I may ask, should you be disappointed?"

She paused a moment, playing absently with her fan, before she answered. Then she said somewhat unwillingly:

"I am disappointed because, though I do not know you very well, I had made up my mind that you were so thoroughly truthful and genuine. In London, you know, one learns to appreciate old-fashioned qualities such as these."

"I admit that I am old-fashioned," he answered, letting his eyes wander across the room to where Bee was smiling upon Cyril Northburgh; "but why must I admit that truthfulness and genuineness are incompatible with my profession, Miss Dinwoodie? It is considered an honourable one enough."

Fay shook her flaxen head.

"It seems to me that an author cannot be altogether true and single-minded," she said slowly. "He must necessarily view all surrounding circumstances as he views his

maginary circumstances. He must work them up to the best advantage, and relate them—not as the bald facts they may possibly be—but dressed out and embroidered, and shown up in the strongest possible light—the pathos intensified, the humour exaggerated, little artistic touches added here and there to heighten the general effect. In short, to an author, all his world, his friends, their joys and sorrows, their good points and their bad points, are simply so much—what do you call it?—*copy*. Nothing is too sacred for portrayal. All emotions writhe under the successful author's strong, relentless, magnifying glass, for the delectation of the British public later on. It seems very cruel, very heartless, I think — almost ghoulish."

Douglas had read something very like the above tirade in one of the monthly magazines; but of course he did not say so, being aware, doubtless, that some eclectic minds unconsciously adopt other people's opinions, and claim them for their own.

I think Fay was looking less elfish and more womanly than usual to-night. At least Douglas fancied so. It was with a smile almost as gentle as those he used to keep in the old days for Bee that he answered:

"I think you are a little prejudiced, are you not? For my own part, I have never made 'copy' of my friends—I feel sure I should not turn out good work if I did. I fancy all an author sees and hears soaks unconsciously into his brain, to lie dormant there until his pen as unconsciously calls it out. Deliberate, forced caricatures, and exaggerated reproductions of individual characters and their traits, rarely touch the will-o'-the-wisp of public fancy. So I have heard, and such has been my experience. Nevertheless, I have heard the question ably argued from the other side. But do not let us talk 'shop,' Miss Dinwoodie. There is nothing more tempting to an author's soul, and nothing more dangerous to his mind's equilibrium. You sing, do you not? Will you let me take you to the piano?"

"Yes—if you will choose a song," she answered, looking up quickly from under her long lashes.

Her mother, seeing the look, frowned and sighed. Of course this gifted and popular young man was all very well, and very good to look at, as well as pleasant to talk to—but after all he was a nobody, and literature was but a precarious calling. Dear, dear, it was very annoying.

It was a plaintive little song of Christina Rossetti's that Fay sang, and the words were these:

"Come to me in the silence of the night;
Come in the speaking silence of a dream;
Come with soft rounded cheeks, and eyes as bright
As sunlight on a stream.
Come back in tears,
O memory, hope, love of finished years.

"O dream, how sweet! so sweet, too bitter-sweet,
Whose waking should have been in Paradise,
Where souls brimful of love abide and meet;
Where thirsting, longing eyes
Watch the slow door
That opening, letting in, lets out no more!

"Yet come to me in dreams that I may live
My very life again though cold in death:
Come back to me in dreams that I may give
Pulse for pulse, breath for breath;
Speak low, lean low—
As long ago, my love, how long ago!"

Fay looked almost pretty when she sang, and Douglas was surprised at the soul and pathos her voice held. He was almost equally surprised to find himself talking to her for the rest of the evening. He had no more conversation with Bee; indeed she appeared very well occupied with Sir Cyril.

Douglas had not yet asked her if her engagement were an accomplished fact. It seemed an impending fact, and that was sufficient for him. He could not speak of it—yet.

One night, about a week later, it happened that Debenham had come up to spend an hour or so in the rooms shared by Conrath and Fenwicke in Charles Street. The latter was out; and the two men whose lives had touched and parted so long ago sat smoking and talking far into the morning.

Dual solitude, the small hours, satisfactory

pipes and tobacco—all these combined are powerful factors in masculine confidences; and Debenham to-night, half-involuntarily, raised a corner of the curtain that hid his past life—a life which, in one respect at least, had been a terrible failure. They had been talking in a somewhat desultory fashion for some time, and a few curt words from Douglas had given the other a glimpse of what he guessed to be the one cankered spot in the lot of this young man so apparently beloved by fortune.

"You have a splendid future before you, Conrath," said the older man, after puffing at his pipe for some time in silence—"a future any man might envy you. Take the advice of one who has had many years of weary experience ahead of you, and don't mar your life as fifty out of every hundred promising young fellows do—by making a hasty, ill-considered marriage."

There was a curious underlying excitement in the speaker's voice which was very foreign to his usual quiet tones.

Douglas's face flushed somewhat.

"I have no intention of marrying," he said slowly.

Debenham looked at him keenly for a few silent seconds; then he filled his pipe again, and said in a slow unwilling kind of way:

"I don't know why I should tell you—I never spoke of it to any one before. But I like you, Conrath. I used to fancy that if I had had a son, I should have wished him to be like you. I feel strongly on the subject of early marriages, because — my own marriage has cursed all my life, and left upon it a shadow that can never be lifted."

Douglas looked up quickly.

"Why, Debenham," he said in surprised tones, "I did not know—it never occurred to me—that you were a married man."

The other struck a match before he spoke, then he said in a low voice:

"No, I daresay not. Nevertheless, I have been married for more years than I care to think of."

Neither spoke for a few moments; then Debenham went on:

"I was only a lad—hardly twenty—when I became a husband; and my wife was a mere child. I fancied myself very much in love, of course—she was marvellously pretty—and for a time I suppose we were happy enough. I knew nothing of her family—in fact I knew very little about herself, except that she was an orphan, and lived with a rather vulgar old woman at Brixton. When we had been married for about six weeks I became aware that my young wife had a temper that was nothing more nor less than devilish—so ungoverned was it. I can give you no adequate description of the terrible scenes that gradually made my home a perfect hell to me. I suppose I had a temper too; I suppose I was partly to blame. I know I avoided my home and my wife as much as possible. Later, I learned that she consoled herself by the inordinate use of—of stimulants; and that, of course, made her temper worse than ever. I don't

know if she had really loved me. I fancy not. Things got from bad to worse," he went on slowly; "I still have the mark of a knife she once threw at me—with an unhappily correct aim—in one of our frequent quarrels. We had but one child—a girl"—here the speaker's voice faltered. "But, oh God!—I—I can't talk of it—it is too horrible."

He stopped suddenly, turned rather white, and covered his eyes with his hand for a moment or two.

Douglas sat silent—touched and moved by the shadow of a trouble before which his own sank into comparative insignificance.

Presently Debenham spoke again. His face looked worn and old.

"Well," he went on in a hard voice—"they said she was insane—dangerously insane. So—I had to let them take her away. She has been in the asylum at Stockley for what has seemed to me an endless term of years. You will be shocked, perhaps, if I say that I have longed—nay, prayed for her death many a

time. For—God help me!—with all my soul I have learned to love another woman."

There was a long silence after that. Then Douglas said abruptly:

"And—the child?"

Debenham raised his head with an inexpressibly anguished look in his tired dark eyes.

"Did you not understand?" he said in a hoarse, choked voice. "She—killed it!"

"Good God!" exclaimed Douglas involuntarily.

"I found out afterwards," continued the other with a curious expression on his quiet face, "that her mother, her sister, and a few other members of her family, had all died raving mad."

At this moment the door opened and Max Fenwicke came in—jovial, gay, and slightly facetious, as usual.

"Hullo, you two!" he exclaimed, slapping them successively on the back. "How glum you both look! Been unearthing old skeletons—eh?"

He turned up the lamp, stirred the fire, and threw himself into a chair. His light jesting words jarred upon the other two; and both were silent.

Good fellow as he undoubtedly was, Fenwicke was apt, at times, to jar upon certain moods. He would have been very much surprised, and genuinely repentant too, I suppose, if he had known how often he made such of his friends who did not regard life in general from his own ever-facetious point of view, wince under the unconscious sting of his perpetually jesting tongue; for he was the kindest-hearted fellow breathing. But, as we all know, "a difference of tastes in jokes is a great strain on the affections." After all, perhaps, I have wronged him a little—for he had his quieter moods; but they only occurred, as he himself would have put it, "once in a blue moon."

* * * * *

On the following day Douglas accompanied Fenwicke to Poldornalupe, where operations were already in progress preliminary to

sinking a shaft in search of the mineral (tin, it was, I believe) regarding which Max was so sanguine. Douglas was beginning to share his friend's enthusiasm; and as a matter of fact he had agreed to put £300 into the concern, which was all he could spare in the meantime. As yet, however, only a few workmen were employed, and the expenses were comparatively small.

On arriving at Poldornalupe, Fenwicke was informed that the foreman who was conducting operations desired to see him.

"Well, Dempster," he said quickly, as the man came forward. "Any news?"

"Yes, sir," the other answered in a tone of suppressed importance. "It is as I thought at first. We are on the top of a rich lode, I am certain. See here."

He produced from his pockets what appeared to Douglas's inexperienced eyes nothing more nor less than a few lumps of dirty stone. But Fenwicke examined them eagerly.

Then he turned to Douglas, his face somewhat pale.

"By Jove, we're on it!" he said, in quick excited tones. "Old fellow—our fortune's made!"

And Douglas—being necessarily a novice in mining matters—had a bewildered sense of their being prospective millionaires.

Of course they started off immediately to the scene of action, and, arrived there, Fenwicke declared that the indications were even more promising than he had previously imagined them to be. Indeed, there seemed little doubt of the presence of a very fair-sized lode, the width of which it was, of course, impossible to conjecture as yet. It was arranged that a shaft should be sunk at once, slightly to the west of the preliminary workings, and Dempster was ordered to put fresh men on to the work in the shortest available space of time. Max was as eagerly excited as a boy. Even his dinner was a matter of little moment to him—which was well, to be sure, as the individual who

superintended the meals at Poldornalupe was unacquainted with even the most primitive ideas of cooking, knowing no medium, indeed, between sending all viands to the table perfectly raw, or burnt to a cinder. To-night, the former mode was in favour. The "mine-owners" (as Fenwicke had already christened Douglas and himself) were, however, for the nonce, superior to gastronomic disappointments. They made a hearty meal of bread and cheese, supplemented by a fair supply of good Scotch whisky—and spent the rest of the evening in concocting glorious plans for the future.

CHAPTER II.

TWO SIDES OF A WALL.

"Le monde n'est jamais divisé pour moi qu'en deux régions; celle où elle est, et celle où elle n'est pas!"

* * * *

"A little later, in a nook,
I saw the pair secluded;
Her face was flushed, and he looked—well!
As likely once you, too, did."

—E. J. S.

"Be not deceived!
The love wherewith I love you is not such
As you would offer me."

—LONGFELLOW.

AMONG the invitations Douglas Conrath accepted between Christmas and Lent was one from Mrs. Osgood Graves, who was given to entertaining enjoyable little house-parties at all sorts of odd times and seasons in her luxurious and picturesque home in Buckinghamshire.

There was a Mr. Osgood Graves, a silent, stern-looking man, many years older than his

beautiful wife, with whom he was passionately in love. For her part, she had married him against her will, and never suffered him to forget that she had done so. She spent his money right royally (fortunately he had a pretty fair supply), and formed a most effective background for his family diamonds. She had not, however, given him an heir to Haricott Hall, which was an unspoken though bitter disappointment to both.

Haricott Hall was not a bad place wherein to lounge away a week now and then. It was cool in summer and warm in winter; the cook was unexceptionable, and the guests were usually well assorted; besides, it was within such easy distance of town.

The Dinwoodies, mother and daughter, often spent a few days at Haricott Hall. Lady Dinwoodie's mother and Mrs. Osgood Graves' mother had, I believe, been distant relatives, and Lady Dinwoodie, as we know, never failed to avail herself of the advantages with which fortune had blessed her friends and connections. She and Fay were there

now, as were also Lady Northburgh and Sir Cyril, Bee Adeane (*without* her grandparents), and a fair sprinkling of other guests, more or less interesting. Douglas went down in company with Max Fenwicke, who, by the way, had been a college chum of Mr. Osgood Graves at Cambridge.

A few days had passed very pleasantly, but to-night the whole party from Haricott Hall were dining at a house several miles away, and, for some unexplained reason, the evening had proved rather a failure. It was now nearly at an end, and the guests were assembled in the drawing-room, praying silently that the end might come quickly. The hostess — fat, fair, and thirty—was engrossed with her favourite cavalier, and had eyes for no one else. The host was arguing himself black in the face on the subject of Gladstone and Home Rule. The young men were moody, the young women pensive. A pretty girl had just sat down to the piano, thus relieving a very elderly vestal who had been favouring the company with

"pieces" as old and as thrilling as the "Battle of Prague" and its contemporaries.

Bee shared in the general depression to-night. She could hardly have told why. Somehow things in general had seemed unsatisfactory of late. As a matter of fact, she was beginning to be a little tired of fashionable life, and was looking forward to the coming London season with anything but pleasure. She used to wonder sometimes if it could be that existence held nothing more satisfying than the continual rush and "going on" from one crowd to another, where there was never more than time to exchange a few hurried words with friends and acquaintances alike, and then skim off to the next entertainment on the evening's or afternoon's list. Was there no home-life now—anywhere? And her perverse heart would turn longingly back to the early days of her childhood, and to shabby obscure Garth Street.

The pretty girl at the piano was singing in a sweet plaintive voice, "Oh that we two were maying." Just behind Bee, who, for a

wonder, was sitting alone, two weary-looking young men, who had driven all the way from Windsor to attend this brilliant entertainment, were discussing people and things in what they fondly imagined to be an undertone.

"Awfully silly song!" murmured the most exhausted-looking of the two, who appeared to have been vanquished in single combat with the letter "g" as a final. "*Mayin'!* What's mayin'? Why mayin'? Why not *marchin'?* I wish I was marchin', I know—anywhere out of this."

"I believe you," acquiesced the other with emphasis. "Were you ever at a much livelier entertainment?"

"Yes," grinned his companion. "I've been in a dentist's waitin'-room."

Both laughed feebly at this sparkling ebullition of wit. Then the second speaker went on with a faint appearance of interest.

"Who's the fetching-looking little woman in black, talking to Northburgh?"

"Oh, that?" said his friend, struggling wildly with his eyeglass. "She's a Miss

Leyden. Our fellows used to call her the Leyden jar, she's so awfully thrillin', don't you know. Northburgh looks rather *épris*, doesn't he?" he added critically.

"Possibly," was the languid answer. "Shows his good taste if he is. I feel as if I were going to be rather *épris* myself."

Bee looked quickly across the room at the "fetching-looking little woman in black."

Cyril certainly was looking rather devoted, and, noting this, a quick, unaccountable pang ran through her consciousness. She was certainly not in love with Sir Cyril; but hitherto his attentions had been hers so absolutely that she had come to look upon them as a right. Their voluntary withdrawal was inconceivable.

Miss Leyden, though not in the least pretty, appeared to possess an irresistible—and to her sister-women unaccountable—attraction for the sterner sex. They flocked about her wherever she went; they vied with each other in anticipating her wishes; they laughed at her sallies—for she was a clever,

sparkling little thing ; they looked grave over her troubles, which she had a pretty appealing way of confiding to them. She had had more offers of marriage than she could count, and it was popularly supposed that she could wind any given man round her little finger—to use a worn-out simile. Military men were her speciality. There were rumours, indeed, that she had refused half the British army, and been engaged, temporarily and consecutively, to the other half. But this was probably a slight exaggeration. At present she was unattached, and on the look-out for further prey—military or civilian, as occasion offered.

As Bee watched the upward glances of Miss Leyden's eyes and the downward glances of Sir Cyril's, she felt both hurt and angry. She was being neglected, not only by Cyril, but by all the other men in the room. This to her was a new order of things, and she did not like it at all. Presently, with a curious lump in her throat, she rose, and wandered into the conservatory, which for a

wonder was empty. Here she was joined by Douglas, who got sharply snubbed for his pains. His look of hurt amazement recalled her to herself, and she laughed apologetically.

"I am so—so tired," she said, with a pathetic little movement of her head. "You must not mind my being cross, dear old Douglas. *You* will never get tired of me, will you?"

He smiled a little at the childlike transparency of her mood.

"No," he said slowly and tenderly, "nor will any one else, I should say. You foolish child! After all, Bee, I think no one understands you as I do. I wonder if you know how like and yet how unlike you are to the little wilful Bee of Garth Street?" he added after a moment or two.

"And you?" she made answer somewhat wistfully. "Ah, you are not in the very least like the Douglas of Garth Street. You are what grandfather calls a 'swell' now. People boast of having your acquaintance. There are paragraphs about you in the

society papers. You are the author of 'Yesterday!' You are flattered, and courted, and run after. And yet, Douglas, my dear, I don't know that it has spoilt you," she added, looking up at him with a frank innocent smile.

How the old loving term of endearment stirred his heart—stirred it with a strange yearning tenderness in which passion had no part!

"Bee," he said unsteadily, after a short pause, during which a somewhat rare plant suffered considerably, "will you tell me something—something which perhaps I have no right to ask? Are you—are you engaged to Sir Cyril Northburgh?"

A deep painful crimson flushed her pure little face.

"No," she answered in a very low voice, after a pause, "I am not engaged to him."

Douglas's heart leapt up, then sank again.

"There is another question I should like to ask," he said somewhat huskily. "Do you——" But he stopped. He was almost

certain she cared for Sir Cyril—but was he entitled to ask the question? Hardly. Besides, it was plain—plain to the meanest understanding—that towards himself she had no feeling warmer than a sister's. And, in truth, she would have been shocked and startled had she divined the mad, overwhelming love he had for her, a love—well, not in the least like a brother's.

"Do I what?" she asked shyly, after a minute.

"Oh, nothing—nothing," he answered with an effort.

"Douglas," she said hesitatingly, when another minute or so had passed, "is anything troubling you? Both Fay and I have thought of late that—that you seemed unhappy."

He did not answer immediately. Then he said in a strange voice:

"Unhappy? Why should I be unhappy? I think I may say I am on the high-road to fortune; and I think I may say I am on the high road to fame. I have many—let us say,

friends; and I have fairly good health of mind and body. What more could I desire?"

"You will not be offended if I—say something?" she said slowly.

"No—I think not."

"Well, I have thought—I have wondered," she went on in an uncertain, faltering way, "if perhaps—you cared for some one—and were not quite sure if—if she cared — for you."

A dead silence.

How strong the scent of the azaleas!—almost overpowering.

At last Douglas spoke.

"Yes? And if it were so?" he said hoarsely.

"Well, dear," laying her little hand on his arm, "I want to tell you—perhaps I ought not—but I can't bear to see you unhappy. Douglas, she *does* care for you—she loves you very dearly."

Another silence.

The subdued hum of voices came to them from the drawing-room. Some one was

singing Kjerulf's "Last Night." The lovely pathetic refrain stole through the heavily-scented flowers and shrubs.

"Bee—do you mean that? Is it true? Do you—do you *understand?*"

His face was white as death. His eyes sought hers in almost passionate entreaty. He had caught her hands, and was holding them close up to his heart.

"Why, yes, dear — of course I understand. And indeed it is quite true. Ah! if I had known you cared so much, I think I should have told you long ago. Poor little Fay! Why, she has loved you, I believe, ever since we were all children together."

"Ever since we were children together!" Ah, God! how the words throbbed and echoed through his heart and brain! Ever since we were children!

He could not speak. A strange sick giddiness took possession of him. He grasped the edge of one of the flower-laden shelves, and half involuntarily closed his eyes.

Presently he was conscious of Bee's hand stealing gently into his.

"Douglas! Oh, my dear, how you must have suffered! How glad I am that you will be happy—at last!"

He turned his eyes full upon her. There was something terrible in the suppressed grief they held—something that Bee could not understand.

"Yes," he muttered, "I have suffered. God knows I have suffered." Then he added abruptly, "Let me go, Bee. I am—ill. This place suffocates me."

With quick, uncertain steps he went out, and Bee remained standing beside a great palm, absently running one of its spiked glossy leaves between her slender fingers.

"Poor Douglas!" she murmured, with a little sigh. "How fond of her he must be!"

Was she glad—or sorry? She hardly knew.

* * * * *

On the next forenoon the sun shone bright and warm, and the whole party, with very

few exceptions, were impounded by Max Fenwicke into exploring—(no, *not* ruins, reader! How could you think it of me? "We've all been there before," much too often)—but a certain wood some miles from Haricott Hall, where a wishing-well of wonderful properties was supposed to be concealed. No one, in the memory of man, had ever been known to discover this wishing-well. Indeed, it was popularly held to be a delusion and a myth. But then, as the indefatigable Max sensibly observed, "Why should it not be found to-day?"

Therefore, immediately after luncheon, behold a heterogeneous mass of young men and maidens piled into variously-sized vehicles *en route* for the desired haven. Of course they expected the afternoon to "keep up"; and, equally of course, the sun disappeared, and the afternoon "went down." An ominously damp wind was blowing as the party alighted on the outskirts of the wood. Max Fenwicke hailed this wind with approbation, as it was "sure to keep off the rain."

The explorers then set off, principally in twos, to discover the well, and so obtain the wishes nearest their hearts. It chanced that Cyril had charge of Bee, Douglas of Fay, and Max Fenwicke of the all-conquering Miss Leyden, to whose charms he had apparently succumbed. "It" did not rain; but when the wind went down "it" did what was, perhaps, worse. A dense, white, clammy mist came swiftly up and enveloped the surrounding landscape in obscurity and gloom.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Cyril Northburgh as he came to a sudden standstill, and gazed around in some perplexity. "We'd better turn back. We shan't be able to see a yard before us in another minute."

Whereupon they turned back But whether they had taken the wrong path, or diverged slightly from the right path, or once more retraced their footsteps, I cannot say. At all events, they found themselves confronted by a sufficiently formidable stone wall; and over this wall, though they skirted

it carefully for some yards to right and left, no way could be found.

"Oh, Cyril, I am so tired," exclaimed Bee at last. "Do let us rest for a minute before we go any further. I'm sure the mist will lift soon."

Now Cyril was by no means sure of anything of the kind. Nevertheless, he was not at all averse to remaining in misty seclusion with his present companion. So he spread his overcoat upon a mossy fallen log, made Bee sit down, and seated himself beside her.

She was looking very sweet and winsome to-day; and Sir Cyril was keenly conscious of the fact. His breath came a little quickly. She had kept him at bay for many months. But—his opportunity had come at last. For such an ordinarily unemotional young man, however, his heart was beating in a way which, as he would have expressed it, was "most deucedly uncomfortable." Love-making was somewhat out of his line; and he had certainly never asked any girl to marry him. A depressing doubt of this

girl's feelings towards him chained his tongue for a space, and drove eloquence far from him.

Bee was sitting curled up on the log like a little sealskin ball—for the grass was unpleasantly wet—her pretty chin resting on her muff, her eyes round and absorbed.

"Bee," said Cyril at last, in a voice that certainly did not seem like his own—"Bee, what is it? What are you thinking about?"

"Hush!" she answered, in an excited whisper. "Hush! There is the dearest little frog hopping straight this way. Look!—over there! Isn't it pretty? Don't move, Cyril. Ah—there!—you have frightened it away!" This in an accent of keen reproach.

"Oh, hang—— I mean never mind the frog," said her companion indignantly. "You can see dozens of them any time."

Bee sighed in a resigned way, and buried her chin in her muff again.

"Bee"—went on Cyril, who had regained his usual self-possession—"you know that I have something to say to you—do you not?"

As he spoke he deliberately took one of her hands out of her muff, and held it firmly in both his.

"To say to me?" she echoed weakly.

"You know that you have made me love you?" he said, his usually cold eyes softening with a light few had ever seen there.

"You know it?" he repeated, as she did not speak.

"Yes," she murmured, "as a friend."

"No, not as a friend."

"How, then?"

"You know very well how."

A silence followed.

"Do you want me to tell you, Bee?" Cyril whispered, after a minute. His arm was round her, and his head was very close to hers. (For a novice, he was really getting on remarkably well, though his observations were certainly not characterized by either brilliancy or originality.)

"Don't you think we ought to go home now?" Bee said perversely. "The mist seems to be thickening."

"Answer me, dear, one way or another," returned her lover, venturing to draw her a little nearer to him, and trying to look into her averted face.

"Does it matter which way?" she said with a half-hysterical laugh.

He loosened his hold a little.

"Bee, are you trifling with me?" he asked somewhat sternly.

Miss Adeane was silent. Her heart was beating fast; her colour rose and ebbed alternately. She lifted her eyes swiftly to his, and as swiftly lowered them again. Two tears hung on her thick dark lashes.

In another moment she felt herself drawn close up to Cyril's heart, and held there.

"My dear one—my own love! You will love me? You will be my wife?" he murmured agitatedly.

But she twisted herself into freedom again.

"Oh, Cyril—wait—listen," she said in a breathless kind of way. "I—I'm not at all sure that I—that I like you—enough." The last words were almost inaudible.

Cyril calmly replaced his right arm in its former position. A caressing smile was just visible under the sweep of his moustache.

"Foolish little darling!" he said, tenderly replacing a lock of hair that had strayed rebelliously from under her hat. "Why, Bee, I shall love you so well, I shall be so good to my little wife, that you will not be able to help loving me. Besides, dear, I think you do care for me just a little. You don't dislike me, do you?"

"No," she made answer slowly, "I don't dislike you, of course. But I'm almost sure I'm not in love with you." And she blushed rosily.

"But, my dear child, very few girls are really in love with the men they marry—just at first, you know," said Sir Cyril, with the air of "one who knows."

"Are they not?" was the doubtful answer.

And again the clear grey eyes met his so wistfully that he almost kissed them. Fearful of startling her at this stage of the proceedings, however, he refrained, and only

said, pulling his moustache with his disengaged hand:

"In nearly all happy marriages the woman's love comes afterwards, you know." (I suppose Sir Cyril thought he was speaking the truth in making this extraordinary statement, but I really cannot vouch for him.)

"Does it?" said Bee, who was thinking of Fay, and of one night when that usually practical young person had wept and sobbed as she confessed her love for a man who had never paid her the slightest attention, much less shown any symptoms of wishing to marry her.

"At any rate," went on Cyril, who was impatient to set the seal of betrothal on the soft fresh lips so near to him—"at any rate, Bee, you like me better than any other fellow."

"Yes—I think I do," she answered after a minute, "except Douglas, of course."

"Oh, Douglas be——" Here the speaker stopped, and choked off a naughty word. Then, after a brief pause, he continued icily:

"Of course, in that case, I need say nothing further." He had withdrawn his arm, and was absolutely white with anger.

Bee looked at him in reproachful remonstrance.

"Why, Cyril, you know Douglas is my brother—in everything except reality," she said, with a quaint little smile. "He doesn't want to marry me, bless his dear old heart—and I don't want to marry him. But do you know, Cyril," she went on with adorable shyness—"I really think I must like you a —a good deal, because—last night——" Here she stopped and wastefully picked little tufts of fur out of her muff.

"Yes," he said, in a considerably mollified tone. "Last night—what?"

"Well"—almost inaudibly—"last night—when you were talking to that Miss Leyden —I felt as if—as if I were so lonely—so neglected——" The rest of the sentence was quite inaudible, principally because Sir Cyril at once took possession of her again, and held her so tightly that she could hardly breathe.

"My dear little girl," he whispered with glad tenderness, "do you mean to say you were jealous? Why, Bee, that is the strongest possible proof that you do care for me."

"Is it?" hiding her hot little face on the breast of his coat. "Well, then, very likely I do care for you—a little. But—I don't know."

"Bee," he said abruptly, "should you be grieved if I went away, and if you never saw me again?"

"Why, Cyril"—raising two startled eyes to his—"of course I should. "You are not going away, are you?"

"Not unless you send me," he made answer, a tender smile stealing round his mouth. "You foolish little one! What an innocent child you are! Do you know that you are very fond of me, Bee? Not nearly so fond of me as I am of you, of course. But that will come afterwards. Say something kind to me, darling," he added, entreatingly. "I have cared for you, I

think, ever since I knew you. And I have waited such a long, weary time. Say you will marry me."

"Well, perhaps—after a long time—I don't know—I'll see," was the somewhat contradictory answer.

It was enough, apparently, for Sir Cyril; for he murmured the approved formula:

"My own darling!"

Then quite suddenly he stooped his head, and pressed his lips on hers in a long passionate kiss.

But, to his surprise, she pushed him violently away from her, and burst into angry tears.

"Oh, *don't!*" she sobbed excitedly. "I don't *want* you to kiss me! I won't *allow* you to kiss me! I won't promise to marry you at all if you are so—so *hateful!*"

Sir Cyril looked petrified, as well he might; and for a few moments there was silence, only broken by Bee's stifled sobs.

At last Cyril said in a slightly sarcastic voice:

"Am I never to be allowed to kiss you at all, then?"

Hardly had the words left his lips than a voice came out of the mist, apparently a few feet away, saying, half reproachfully, half indignantly:

"I think it's awfully cruel of you—I do indeed!"

With a short sharp exclamation, Cyril sprang to his feet.

Bee jumped up too, ceased crying, and grasped her companion's arm.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed in a vehement whisper. "Who's that?"

Presently the voice went on again:

"I assure you I never cared for any woman before, except once, and that was years ago. But from the moment I saw you here, I felt, you know, that—that it was all over with me."

The voice was Max Fenwicke's, and it held a ring of pathos that in him seemed almost comic. It was Miss Leyden's voice that answered:

"Oh, Mr. Fenwicke, I am so cold, and my feet are so wet. How can I tell if I reciprocate your feelings or not—just now?"

"Where are they?" whispered Bee, still clinging to Cyril.

"On the other side of the wall," he answered in the same tone.

"But look here, Miss Leyden," went on Fenwicke's voice, "I don't want you to make any promise, but—if you only do not engage yourself to any other fellow in the meantime."

"Why, of course I shall not," was the somewhat petulant answer. "I have no intention of being engaged to any one. I only want to get home, and to get warm. *Would* you mind taking me back to the others now? I'm sure you can find the way if you try. And I feel certain I am taking cold."

"Good Heavens! what a brute I am! Of course we will go back at once. But—you will let me kiss your hand first, won't you? Upon my word, I don't know what you've

done to me. Bewitched me, I think. I never thought I should be such a fool about any woman. *May* I?" This very earnestly.

"Yes, you may kiss my hand if you want to, of course. But I'm afraid you will find my glove very wet. This mist is so unpleasant."

There was a short silence, during which Fenwicke presumably took advantage of the permission accorded to him.

Then, after a moment's struggle, Bee laughed—laughed out loud.

"Hush!" whispered Cyril, giving her a little shake. Nevertheless, he was laughing too, though silently.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Fenwicke's voice. "What was that?"

And straightway a scrambling noise preceded the appearance of his indignant face above the top of the wall.

Bee and her companion had subsided on to their log again.

"Oh—er—Fenwicke, is that you?" said

Sir Cyril, arranging his eyeglass with an elaborate assumption of surprise. "It's—er —going to be wet, I'm afraid."

"Have you been here long?" inquired Fenwicke, who was looking rather embarrassed.

"No—just this moment arrived," was the prompt and mendacious answer. "We missed our way somehow, and sank down exhausted on this log. You are alone, I suppose?" he added blandly.

"Well—er—no; Miss Leyden is here," Max answered in a casual kind of way. "We're—er—just arrived too. In fact——" He paused.

Both men looked at each other expressively. Then they both roared.

In the midst of their laughter Miss Leyden climbed over the wall.

"Allow me," said Cyril courteously, rising to accelerate her descent.

"Oh, Sir Cyril, is that you?" she said, smiling sweetly. "And Miss Adeane? I *thought* I heard your voice. Mr. Fenwicke

and I are hurrying home. We are so afraid of being lost in the mist."

"Miss Adeane and I were also hurrying home," observed Sir Cyril, stroking his moustache gravely, and gazing straight before him.

"Let us all hurry home together," said Bee demurely.

"Come away, then," acquiesced Miss Leyden, moving nearer to Sir Cyril.

But Fenwicke was not to be shaken off.

"Take my arm, Miss Leyden," he said, half imploringly, half authoritatively.

She hesitated, but observing that Sir Cyril had turned to appropriate Bee, accepted the proffered arm, and disappeared with her cavalier into the mist.

Bee and Cyril walked on for some time in silence, he having returned to the recollection that he was somewhat offended with her, she wondering if their remarks had been as audible to Fenwicke and Miss Leyden as that couple's had been to herself and Cyril.

When they had proceeded some little way Cyril said coldly:

"I wish I understood you, Bee. At one time you give me to understand that—er—there is a possibility of your caring for me, and then you show me plainly that my very touch is repulsive to you."

"Oh, no! I didn't say that, Cyril," was the hasty answer. "I only meant that—that I hated you to kiss me."

"It is the same thing," shortly.

"No, it isn't," in an aggrieved voice, suggestive of possible further tears. "I'm not accustomed to being kissed—by men, I mean."

"Well, no, I should hope not," he answered in an utterly indescribable tone.

"Perhaps—very likely I shall get used to it as time goes on," observed Miss Adeane, looking up at him with troubled grey eyes. "But, in the meantime, I should very much rather you didn't kiss me—at all."

"Pooh! You are talking nonsense," he answered brusquely. "If you don't want to

be engaged to me, say so. But I warn you that if we *are* engaged, the probabilities are that I shall kiss you whenever I get a chance. Any fellow would."

"I thought—I thought you would be so different," she faltered. "You always seemed so calm, and sensible, and nice."

"Oh, yes, I daresay," he answered in an exasperated sort of way. "It is usually my fate to be considered beyond the pale of all human passions and emotions. I don't know why, I'm sure."

A pause. Then a small voice said:

"Are you angry, Cyril?"

"Yes, I am angry," he replied, tersely enough. "I am not a saint—nor anything in the least like one."

Then all at once he stopped short in the middle of the dimly-seen pathway, and took her hands somewhat roughly in his.

"Bee—for God's sake don't torture me in this way," he said agitatedly. "Am I to understand that you don't care for me—or that you do? If you do—I am fool enough

to promise not to kiss you again until you give me permission to do so. But I tell you —it's awfully hard lines."

His face was pale, and he really looked very handsome, Bee thought, as he stood there in the dim light.

"Very well," she said slowly, "we will be engaged, then. But—we will not think of being married or anything of that kind for years and *years* to come."

Cyril made an impatient movement.

"*Years!*" he remonstrated. "Oh, my dear, be reasonable."

"It is all settled," said Bee cheerfully but inflexibly, "so don't let us talk any more nonsense in the meantime. Listen! there is Mr. Fenwicke calling to us. Oh, joy! they have found the way out of the wood at last!"

Five minutes later the whole party were obscurely assembled round the waiting carriages.

And — not one of them had found the mythical wishing-well.

CHAPTER III.

NO ALTERNATIVE!

"To-morrow we meet the same then, dearest.
May I take your hand in mine?
Mere friends are we—well, friends the merest
Keep much that I resign."

—ROBERT BROWNING.

"We know each other's faces; for our hearts—
He knows no more of mine than I of yours;
Nor I of his, my lord, than you of mine."

* * * *

SIR CYRIL insisted on announcing his engagement to Miss Adeane with as little delay as possible. Perhaps he was afraid she would change her mind.

"No, dear," he said with that ineffable calm of manner and speech which always exasperated Bee particularly, "I have given in to you a good deal; but in this matter you must allow me to be the best judge I do not approve of secret engagements, even for a short time. They give rise to all sorts of mis-

understandings, and — er — are a nuisance generally."

It was late in the afternoon of the day following the wishing-well expedition, and by the assistance of their hostess, with whom Sir Cyril was a special favourite, the lovers were alone in a tiny tower-room, dignified by the name of the "boudoir."

"But, Cyril," remonstrated Bee, trifling nervously with the tassel of the window-blind, "we must wait until we have grandfather's consent. You know that."

"Of course. And *après?*" he said quietly.

"Oh, well, after that it will be different."

"Ah! I am glad of that," was the cool answer. "I went up to town early this morning, saw your grandfather, and have succeeded in obtaining his consent to our marriage."

"To our engagement," amended Bee uneasily.

"To our engagement, then—if you like it better," he said impatiently.

"I hardly know," he continued, with a

short laugh, "if you will accept an engagement ring from me. I bought one for you to-day. Here it is."

As he spoke he drew from his pocket a small velvet case containing the orthodox "superb half-hoop of diamonds."

Cyril was not at all the kind of fellow to devise touchingly symbolical designs in jewellery for his betrothed. He was not in the least a sentimental young man, and simply bought "the usual thing" in betrothal rings. The diamonds, however, were of considerable size and exquisite brilliancy, and Bee coloured with pleasure as a stray gleam of sunshine flashed into life all their prismatic colours.

"Oh, Cyril, how lovely!" she exclaimed, holding out her hand at once, and without the faintest assumption of coquetry, for him to put it on.

He did so lingeringly; then said in a deliberate sort of way, still holding the slender fingers in his:

"I don't know if I may venture to kiss

your hand, my dear Bee, but if so——" He paused, and looked at her unsmilingly.

"Why, yes, of course you may," was the prompt answer.

"Ah, thanks," proceeding at once to do so. "I wasn't sure, you know."

"How absurd you are," was the laughing answer. "Why, ever so many men have kissed my hand."

"Indeed?"—this in a curiously unamiable tone. "In the future—at the risk of being considered exacting—I should prefer its being a peculiar privilege of my own."

"Very well," she answered abstractedly; "I don't mind—not the least little bit."

He looked at her with rather an odd light in his eyes for a moment or two. Then he said:

"Ah!" and stared moodily out of the window.

"I suppose we are really engaged now?" observed Bee presently, regarding her diamonds with loving pride.

"I have an impression that we are," was the somewhat dry answer.

"You are vexed at something, Cyril, are you not?" she said, putting her hand confidingly through his arm.

"Oh, not at all," he replied sarcastically. "I am only wondering if any other lover would submit to the restrictions you impose upon me."

Bee's face grew pink—then rosy.

"You mean, I suppose, that you want to—kiss me?" she said slowly.

He turned and looked down at her, his usually serene blue eyes darkened by an unmistakable frown.

"I do want to kiss you, certainly. What do you think I'm made of?"

"Very well—you may then," nervously. "Fay says that it is—that it is usual."

Sir Cyril reddened slightly.

"Fay is a most well-informed young woman on all subjects, I have no doubt," he said, with a short laugh.

And then he drew Bee gently within his arm and kissed her. But he did not kiss her lips this time, only brushed her forehead

lightly with his moustache, and released her instantly. Nevertheless, she gave a quick sigh of relief as he withdrew his arm again.

"What a cold, cruel little thing you are!" he said somewhat savagely. "And yet—I suppose you know you can do with me just what you like."

She laughed softly.

"Don't look so absurd, Cyril. Tragedy and gloom don't suit you. You are cut out for the correct society young man, and you become a goose when you go in for anything more emotional. Come down and let us have tea. I hate it half cold!"

* * * * *

Mrs. Osgood Graves had informed all the company of Sir Cyril's engagement, and when the pair made their tardy appearance in the cosy, fire-lit inner hall, where afternoon tea was in progress, they were overwhelmed with congratulations.

Bee got through a few blushes very becomingly, and subsided into a chair near Fay, who was looking radiant and almost

pretty. Douglas was not visible. Bee felt hurt, somehow, that his congratulations should be the last of all.

Later, when they had all gone to dress save Bee herself, Douglas came in. He looked pale and tired, and came up to the fire — where Bee was standing — without speaking.

"Why, Douglas, I have been wondering where you were," she said gaily. "There is no one left but me to give you your tea, and I am not at all sure that there is any to give you."

"Thank you, I don't care for any tea," he said quickly.

"Where have you been, you bad boy?" she went on, leaning her pretty head against his arm. "You look quite cold and cross."

"I have been for a walk," he said absently, "and—I suppose I went further than I intended."

"Douglas," she said shyly, after a moment or two, "do you know? Have they told you?"

He did not answer immediately; then he said in a curiously repressed voice:

"Yes—I know. They have—told me."

"And," reproachfully, "are you not going to wish me happiness?"

He stood quite still for a minute, his face stony and expressionless.

You see, in real life, men—men who are worthy the name, that is to say—take their hardest blows for the most part in silence, and without any of those dramatic gestures and fine speeches which certain playwrights and novelists have accustomed us to. It is exciting and romantic, to be sure, to see the despairing lover rant and rave, and tear his hair, and beat his breast as though it were a tambourine; but alas! it is not *real*. And as I am simply relating an ordinary every-day story, I am obliged to keep to facts, and confess that, though Douglas was to-night suffering the bitterest pain he had ever known, he made no sign, and only said, after a short pause:

"Do you need to ask that?" Then he

added with infinite tenderness, "My little Bee, I pray God you may be very, very happy. I have known for a long time that Northburgh —cared for you; and I have more than suspected that you—cared for him."

"Well, you knew more than I did then," she murmured, rubbing her head up and down his coat sleeve. Then, after a minute, she said, looking up at him with adorable, innocent eyes, "And are you not going to kiss your little sister, then, on such an auspicious occasion? Are you going to let the new ties entirely supersede the old ones? Kiss me directly, you hard-hearted old thing."

His face grew white; his hands opened and shut in a kind of dumb agony. He knew well enough it was no brother's kiss he could give her then; and he would have died rather than have disturbed her innocently loving idea of him. With a mighty effort he controlled himself, and said quietly:

"No, dear, I will not kiss you. Your—your lover would not like it; and—I can understand that he would not. Nevertheless,

no one in the world desires your happiness more earnestly, more passionately, than I."

"Ah, Douglas!" she said, smiling roguishly, "how loyal you are, you dear old fellow! And, do you know, I think I like you the better for it."

He looked down at her and smiled—a smile that would have broken her heart if she had known all the misery it held at bay.

"And are you very happy, my dear?" he said, in a low voice.

She did not answer, but his jealous eyes noted the swift colour that mounted to her fair face.

"That is well, child," he went on, laying his hand on her tawny hair. "It makes me —very happy—to think—to know that the future of my little girl is so bright, and so likely to be free from care."

"Dear old Douglas!" she made answer caressingly. "I know that no one wishes me happiness more sincerely than you do. But when am I to congratulate you, my dear? I quite long to welcome Fay as a sister."

He looked at her for a moment half incredulously.

"Fay!" he said, in a strange hoarse voice. "What have I to do with Fay, or she with me? You must be mad, Bee, to talk of such things—now!"

"My poor Douglas, you are tormenting yourself unnecessarily," went on the sweet childish voice. "Don't you *know* how the poor darling loves you? When I told her last night how miserable you were, and how you did not dare to tell her of your love, she —oh, my dear, I hardly like to tell you—but she cried for joy."

Douglas did not speak. He was leaning against the mantelshelf, his eyes hidden by his hand.

How loud the measured beats of the great clock on the staircase! How the wind swept and swirled round the high, old-fashioned windows!

Presently Douglas altered his position slightly, and said in a voice Bee had never heard before:

"You—told her—of my—love for her?"

"Yes, dear. I could not bear to see you both so unhappy, and to know that a word would put everything right."

Another silence.

Far up the staircase sounded the tap, tap of a woman's footsteps.

Douglas felt Bee's soft lips upon the hand that hung nervelessly by his side; then she flitted noiselessly away.

For a moment or two he stood quite still where she had left him, then sank into a chair, pressing his hands to his forehead, as if in actual physical pain.

The fire had died down to a dull red; a pale wintry moon stole in, her light lying in bars of faint silver across the dark oak floor.

The footsteps had halted for a brief space; then they came nearer—nearer—close to him —and stopped.

He did not stir.

"Douglas," said a sweet tremulous voice—Fay's voice. "Douglas!"

He raised his head then, and looked at her, as one in a dream. She was kneeling beside him; her hand was on his arm; her face, wet with tears, was very close to his.

Heavy clouds had drifted across the moon; the silent hall was in darkness.

Even in his own misery a curious pity for the trembling young creature at his side took possession of him. She loved him, poor child. She believed that he loved her. Could he condemn her to suffer as he was suffering?—nay, more—to the humiliating knowledge of having betrayed her love, unasked, to a man who would have none of it? What could he do? What ought he to have done? I cannot tell you. What he did do was to put his arm round her and draw her to him, with much the same impulse with which he would have comforted a grieving child.

She hid her face on his arm in a passion of tears.

"Oh, Douglas—I am so happy!" she sobbed breathlessly.

Ah! it was well for her, if not for him, that she did not see his face just then. Surely the look in his eyes would have enlightened her.

They remained thus for some time—silently; for he could not trust himself to speech, and her joy held her dumb.

"What does it matter? What can it matter?" his sore heart echoed drearily. "If I can brighten her life, why not? My own life is over—so far as love is concerned."

And so he sealed his fate.

Presently Fay started to her feet, and moved away from him.

"I—I thought I heard some one coming," she said nervously.

Just then the dressing-gong sounded from the outer hall.

Douglas rose, and took the girl's cold little hands in his.

"Fay—I am a comparatively poor man," he said in a strange, almost hard voice. "Are you willing to face the world with me?"

"Oh, yes, I am willing!" came her tremulous answer through the semi-darkness.

Poor child! She did not notice his shortcomings as a lover. To face the world with him! What would she not have faced with him?

He bent his head and kissed her forehead. His lips were cold, and he uttered no murmured love-words. But Fay was happy—unutterably happy. For one brief second her head rested on his heart. How strongly and swiftly it beat!

Then she fled quickly up the broad oak staircase, and he was once more alone. He felt old and tired, and desperately heart-sick.

* * * * *

Some hours later, when dinner was a thing of the past, a slim fur-robed figure stepped out upon the terrace in the chilly moonlight, and went noiselessly to Douglas Conrath's side as he leaned moodily over the heavy stone coping which overlooked the desolate winter-bound rose garden.

The figure, which belonged to Bee Adeane,

slipped its little hand under his arm, and glanced up affectionately into his face, which surely looked strangely white and haggard under the searching moonbeams.

"It is my turn now to congratulate you, Douglas," said the new-comer softly. "Fay has told me how happy she is; and I know how happy you must be. And now I see you are looking anxious and worried, because you are thinking, not so much of Fay herself, as of—Fay's mother. Is it not so?"

Now, as a matter of fact, Douglas had been wondering somewhat wearily and sardonically how Lady Dinwoodie would take his proposal for her daughter. He had not much to offer, certainly, and even if she gave her consent to an engagement, she would probably utterly scout the idea of a speedy marriage—for which later possibility happy Miss Dinwoodie's *fiancé* was almost passionately thankful.

In answer to Bee's sympathetic words he answered quietly:

"Yes, I was thinking of Lady Dinwoodie."

"I'm afraid, you know,' went on Bee—"don't be angry, dear—but I'm *afraid* she may be just a little—*difficile*."

"I think it is more than probable," Douglas answered, with a short laugh, which was certainly not a merry one.

"But I am sure," added his companion earnestly, "when she knows how much you love each other, and when you explain to her—as of course you will do—how certain you are to be both rich and famous very, *very* soon—that she will give her consent."

He did not answer. He was looking steadily away from her, his gaze resting mechanically upon the silvered branches of the evergreens in the shrubbery.

For a few moments Bee was silent too. Then she said in a dreamy voice:

"It is a strange coincidence, is it not, my dear, that you and I should both be engaged to be married almost on the same day? Is it a happy omen, I wonder? Does it mean that——"

"Bee!—for God's sake, don't speak to me

any more!" he interrupted her hoarsely. "Not to-night. I—I can't bear it!"

The words held a kind of heart-broken impotent cry, and Bee was both startled and alarmed.

"Douglas," she whispered agitatedly, "what is it? What have I said?"

He was leaning his elbows on the edge of the balcony, and as she spoke he hid his face in his hands with a suppressed groan.

Just then, by one of those malicious chances with which Fate loves so dearly to confront us, Cyril Northburgh came out upon the terrace.

Now, if you have reason to imagine that your betrothed cares for you just about one half as much as you care for her; and if you have been chafingly wondering at her non-appearance for the best part of half-an-hour; and if at the end of that time you find her on a moonlit terrace with a fellow for whom you entertain rather a dislike than otherwise, all alone by themselves, you will be hardly human if you don't feel out of temper.

Conrath's dejected attitude, Bee's anxious startled face—all seemed to indicate to the new-comer some kind of "scene" which his advent had interrupted.

"Had you not better come indoors, Bee?" he said in a tone of icy displeasure. "Are you not afraid of taking cold?"

At the sound of his voice Douglas started and raised his head; then, without speaking, he passed into the house, leaving the lovers alone.

"Your friend seems rather knocked out of time," observed Cyril disagreeably. "What's the matter with him?"

Bee resented his lordly tone, and made answer, with an indignant flash in her grey eyes:

"I think you are exceedingly rude, Cyril, and I may tell you at once that if you are going to get into one of your absurd tantrums about nothing at all, I shall just break off our engagement—or whatever you call it—at once, and that will be the end."

This threat secretly dismayed her lover, for

he knew she was more than capable of carrying it out. Besides, her words cut him to the quick.

"Our 'engagement, or whatever you call it,'" he repeated in a deeply hurt voice, "is not so easily broken. Surely, Bee, there is no one to whom you are so cruel as you are to me."

"Oh, I am not cruel," she answered petulantly. "But I am so worried and unhappy about my darling Douglas."

"Bee! Upon my word!" remonstrated Sir Cyril hotly.

"Of course you are quite happy, and so you don't care," went on Bee, unheeding. "It is nothing to you that poor Douglas is so miserable. But Cyril"—with a sudden happy thought—"I want to ask you something. You will do it, won't you?"

Her companion turned somewhat pale.

"I don't understand you," he answered sternly. "What do you mean?"

Bee twined her little hands about his arm, and said very earnestly:

"You will listen to me, will you not?"

"I am listening," he replied in an icy tone.

"And—you will not be angry?"

"I cannot tell you"—more icily still. Then, glancing at his watch, he added, "But as it is rather late, may I ask you to say what you have to say as quickly as possible?"

There was a moment's pause; then Bee said, with a half-sob in her voice:

"Shall you be as cross to me when—when I am your wife, Cyril?"

He turned and took her almost fiercely in his arms.

"Bee"—he said inarticulately, "do you know that you are *torturing* me? Tell me, for pity's sake, what you mean. Is it—is it that you have repented of your—your promise of yesterday?"

He looked so white and agitated, so unlike himself, that tender-hearted Bee was full of concern.

"Cyril, how dreadful—how *ill* you look," she said hastily. "Most certainly I don't want to break my promise to you. What I

have to ask you has nothing to do with myself—nothing at all. You cannot have understood me. It is about Douglas—Douglas and Fay."

"About Douglas and Fay," he repeated mechanically, while a keen shiver of relief ran through him. "Douglas and Fay. What about them?"

"I will tell you directly. But first take away your arms. Fancy if any one were to come out."

"Wait a moment," he said unsteadily. "Oh, Bee, my dearest—do you know how horribly you frightened me? My love, my darling, forgive me that I doubted you." His eyes held an unwonted look of passion; he was breathing somewhat quickly. "My own little sweetheart!" he murmured passionately. And with the words he bent his head and kissed her lips.

She did not resist his caress this time—and indeed it was a very gentle one—but blushed rosily, and extricated herself from his arms.

"Now, listen to me," she said hurriedly. "Douglas wants to marry Fay, and Fay wants to marry him. And we are quite sure Lady Dinwoodie will not approve of it. So of course Douglas is very unhappy. Now, if you will speak to your aunt—you know she always takes your advice—then it will be all right."

"But, my dear child," answered Cyril, when he could get a word in, "I'm—er—I'm not at all sure that — er — that a marriage of that kind would be for my cousin's happiness."

He was secretly, however, both surprised and relieved, having been hitherto under the impression that Douglas's affections lay in the same direction as his own.

"A marriage of what kind?" repeated Bee indignantly. "Why, *any* girl might be proud to marry Douglas!"

Cyril shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"I am not detracting in any way from Mr. Conrath's merits," he said quietly. "The question is—can he afford to marry? That is

to say, if he marries, can he afford to live in the way in which Fay has been accustomed to live? She is fond of pretty things and luxuries, you know; and literature is rather a precarious calling."

"But they wouldn't want to be married just yet," was the eager answer. "Nobody wants to be married just directly they are engaged."

"That is your opinion, doubtless," observed her *fiancé* drily. "But I doubt if your friend Douglas will agree with you."

"And besides," went on Bee, with growing earnestness, "no one can doubt that Douglas will be a rich man one day. With such genius as his, fortune *must* come."

"I am sorry to damp your enthusiasm, my dear child; but I can assure you that in the race for wealth geniuses are simply nowhere. If one intends being born a genius, it is well to ensure oneself being born a millionaire as well."

"But, Cyril, Douglas told me himself that he makes £500 a year out of short stories

and sketches alone; and, besides that, he is writing another book, and he will certainly get not less than £1,000 for that. So there is £1,500 at once. Why, even your income can't be much more than that."

"Can't it?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

"*Have* you more than that, Cyril? How much have you—a year, I mean? Do tell me," she asked curiously.

"Just about as many thousands as the hundreds you have been talking of," he said, laughing. "And I don't find it at all too much, I can tell you."

Bee looked almost distressed.

"Oh, Cyril," she said, "I had no idea you were so—so well off."

"Hadn't you?" he answered tenderly. "Well, you are a dear little unworldly darling; and I have no doubt that you are the only woman of my acquaintance who didn't know. Now we must go in. It is getting chilly. As for Conrath, let him manage his love affairs for himself. You have enough to do with your own. No, Bee,

I shall not interfere—so all your blandishments are in vain."

And with a caressing laugh he stooped and kissed her again. Then drawing her hand through his arm, he led her into the house.

* * * * *

It was the forenoon of the next day; and the Fates had prepared a bad little quarter of an hour for Douglas.

He had just come round from the stables with Max Fenwicke, when in crossing the outer hall he met Lady Dinwoodie. She stopped, and said in a rather imperious tone:

"I shall be glad of a little conversation with you, Mr. Conrath, if you are quite at liberty."

Douglas bowed silently, and followed her into the morning-room, which chanced to be empty. A feeling of resentment took possession of him. He had intended to seek this interview to-day, of course; but, naturally, he did not like it to be forced upon him, and I am afraid his bearing showed as much. He stood very tall and straight upon the hearth-

rug, his eyes bent upon his companion with "an air of dignity quite beyond his income," as that lady unconsciously quoted to herself.

"I also wished to have a short conversation with you, Lady Dinwoodie," he said quietly. "In a word, I would ask your permission to become engaged to your daughter."

"Oh, of course I know that. Fay has told me all about it," was the impatient answer. "That is what I want to speak to you about. I have dreaded it for some time; and if I had known you were to be here I should certainly have kept her away. You must see, Mr. Conrath, what a very foolish marriage it would be. Of course your career may be a brilliantly successful one; but then it may be quite the reverse. Fay is not the girl to be happy without—er—a great many things that she would not have as your wife. Pardon me if I speak plainly, but you must remember that my child's happiness is of the last importance to me. I do not think you

ought to have spoken to her, Mr. Conrath. I do not indeed."

"I am aware," Douglas answered, in a low tired voice, very unlike that of an anxious lover, "that in many ways I am not what would be called a 'good match' for your daughter. If I did not believe that her—her marriage with me would be for her happiness, I should not presume to ask for your consent. I cannot, perhaps, offer her quite such a luxurious home as she has been accustomed to; but I hope to improve my position, and she should, at least, have all the care and——" Here he hesitated and coloured deeply, then went on, in a somewhat hurried tone, "And I should do all in my power to make her happy."

"Oh, of course, of course," fretfully. "You all say the same. And I suppose Fay will give me no peace until I consent. It really is too provoking. I had such different views for her."

Douglas was silent. His marked air of depression and his excessive pallor were, of

course, taken by Lady Dinwoodie as evidences of his consuming love for her daughter. She felt sorry for him; indeed, his gentle courteous manners, and perhaps his handsome eyes, caused him to win his way to the hearts of most women. But she knew it was necessary to harden her heart, and did so.

"I suppose you are aware that my daughter has no money, Mr. Conrath," she said, looking at him searchingly—"nor any prospect of any." The next moment she felt rather ashamed of this little speech.

Douglas drew himself up haughtily.

"I never thought of the matter," he said, with a sudden flash in his eyes. "Her having money or not is a matter of the utmost indifference to me."

Lady Dinwoodie coughed gently.

"Suppose we leave the matter—in the meantime, Mr. Conrath?" she said, leaning forward with an engaging smile.

Just then the door opened, and Fay herself came in. She was looking pale and tired.

Douglas thought he had never seen her look plainer and less attractive.

"Now, mother, I have caught you," she said gaily as she entered. "I suppose you are trying to persuade Douglas to give me up. But it is not one bit of use. Is it, Douglas?" And as she spoke she came up to him, and put her hand, with happy confidence, through his arm.

He smiled faintly.

"Your mother has persuaded me that I am the most selfish of men," he said, without, however, glancing at the flushed adoring face which just reached his shoulder.

"Ah, mother, it is too bad of you!" exclaimed Fay passionately. "How can you love me, as you say you do, if you are so cruel to me? If I do not marry Douglas I shall marry no one—*no* one, I tell you!" And the spoiled self-willed girl broke into a perfect storm of sobs.

Her mother looked helpless and worried.

And Douglas? What could he do but comfort her—this headstrong girl, who had

so fearlessly avowed her love for him, and evidently trusted so implicitly in his love for her?

"Hush, hush, my dear," he said nervously, stroking the bowed flaxen head, and looking as happy and comfortable as most Englishmen do when they are partakers of a sentimental scene. "Fay, calm yourself. Do—there's a good girl."

His tone was not in the least lover-like. Indeed, to a keen ear it held a suppressed irritation; and a faint but unmistakable frown drew down his dark eyebrows.

"Fay—really, I am astonished at you!" exclaimed her mother. "Mr. Conrath—I—really——" And with a despairing gesture that spoke volumes, she, too, wept—for pure vexation.

It was at this inauspicious moment that the door opened to admit Max Fenwicke and Miss Leyden, followed almost immediately by Sir Cyril Northburgh and Bee.

Douglas smothered a very objectionable word between his teeth, and regarded the

intruders with a haughty stare. At the same time Fay, to his infinite relief, raised herself from his arms and stopped crying.

There was a minute's dead silence, during which Fenwicke and Miss Leyden judiciously withdrew. As the door closed behind them, Fay went quickly up to her cousin, and said in a faint, imploring voice :

"Cyril, you have always been good to me. Speak to mother, and tell her how unkind she is."

Sir Cyril was looking annoyed and perplexed, for Bee's little fingers were surreptiously pinching his arm at quick intervals. He knew that she expected him to take the part of the lovers ; and he knew that in doing so he would be acting in direct opposition to his judgment.

Douglas was standing upright and rigid, his lips compressed, his eyes—with an utterly untranslatable expression in their dark depths —looking straight before him.

Presently Cyril spoke.

"Suppose you and I talk this over, aunt?"

he said, addressing Lady Dinwoodie in his most expressionless manner. "You can see Mr. Conrath again later."

Bee silently drew Fay out of the room, and Douglas turned to Lady Dinwoodie, who was still lying back in her chair, her handkerchief pressed to her eyes. Taking her hand in his, he said, in a low voice:

"I do not wish you to make any decision but what you think will be for your daughter's happiness. Put me out of the question altogether."

A speech at which Sir Cyril marvelled.

"By Jove!" he mused as Douglas left the room, "the fellow must either be devilishly fond of her—or else he doesn't care a rap for her." But, of course, he dismissed the latter contingency as absurd.

As for Douglas, he flung himself out of doors, in a mood impossible to be described. He tramped down the avenue, and thence out on to the muddy road, his hands plunged fiercely into his pockets, and an unlighted cigar held firmly between his teeth, hardly

knowing whether he felt more wretched or more furious.

When he returned, some hours later, Sir Cyril met him.

"I think I've made it all right for you, Conrath," he said, more cordially than usual —for the other's white haggard face touched him somehow. "You'll find my aunt about somewhere. Accept my congratulations. I feel sure you'll do your best to make Fay happy, and—er—all that sort of thing, you know," he concluded in the graceful and lucid phraseology of the modern Englishman.

"Thank you," returned Douglas, somewhat stiffly, as he took the hand the other held out to him.

For the life of him he could not bring himself to say anything further; and after a moment's awkward silence the two men parted and went their several ways—Cyril in search of Bee, and Douglas in search of his future mother-in-law.

CHAPTER IV.

"JUST FOR TO-NIGHT!"

"So one day more am I deified;
Who knows but the world may end to-night?"

—ROBERT BROWNING.

"The effort to be strong,
And, like the Spartan boy, to smile, and smile,
While secret wounds do bleed beneath our cloaks—
All this the dead feel not—the dead alone!
Would I were with them!"

—LONGFELLOW.

MRS. OSGOOD GRAVES was giving a small dance to-night, and everybody was swinging and floating and twirling and gliding and otherwise disporting themselves to the strains of the latest popular band. (The Blue Hungarians, with their Red brothers, had not yet come into fashion.)

Douglas had of course been doing various duty dances with his *fiancée*, who was looking radiant, and very nearly pretty. Douglas himself was looking anything but radiant.

Indeed, he looked as surely never newly accepted lover looked before. His expression of sternness and gloom was noticed by more than a few of the house guests, and commented on variously.

"In Heaven's name, what is the matter with Conrath?" said Cyril to Bee, as they paused near a flower-banked window at the upper end of the room. "He looks as if he were condemned to death. Surely he and Fay can't have been quarrelling already?"

Bee looked across to where Douglas was standing leaning against the wall, his hands clasped behind him, his eyes bent moodily upon the polished floor in front of him.

"Perhaps he has a headache," suggested Bee. "I know he works fearfully hard. Or perhaps something has vexed him."

"Small doubt of the latter, I should say," observed her lover, with a languid smile. "As for a headache, no fellow should think twice of fifty headaches if he is newly engaged to the girl he cares for. By the way," he added somewhat abruptly, "I

suppose there's no doubt that—er—that he *does* care for her?"

Bee opened her eyes very wide.

"Care for her?" she repeated. "Why, my dear Cyril, he adores her—simply *adores* her!"

"Well, he's not exactly what one would call a cheerful-looking lover, is he?" returned Sir Cyril. "You wouldn't like to see me looking like that, now, would you?"

"You *couldn't* look like that," she made answer saucily. "You always look the most tranquil, self-satisfied, ultra-conceited being in the room, wherever you may be."

"Do you really think so?" he murmured. "Shall we finish this waltz, or shall we sit it out?"

"No, indeed, you lazy fellow; we shall just dance it to the very end," she answered decidedly.

Later in the evening she danced with Douglas. He had only asked for one dance—a waltz; and to that waltz he had been looking forward passionately and feverishly

ever since he had inscribed his initials on Bee's dance card. It had been almost more than he could bear to see her floating round the room, ceaselessly, it seemed to him, in Cyril Northburgh's arms. Of course this was a state of mind highly to be condemned. But what will you? Hearts won't move to order, and as often as not move out of order. Indeed, most of us find a heart a more than sufficiently troublesome possession. Happy, perhaps, those who have none. Even Sir Cyril, you see, was occasionally driven off the lines of his usually tranquil repose of speech and manner.

When Douglas came to claim his dance, Bee looked up at him with a mischievous smile.

"I thought you had forgotten me," she said.

"You did not think so," he answered roughly—so roughly that Bee decided Cyril must be right—poor Douglas evidently had something on his mind.

The waltz had begun. It was a new one,

a special favourite of Bee's, dreamily, passionately sweet—"one of those irresistible waltzes that first catch the ear, and then curl round the heart."

A fierce joy took possession of Douglas as he put his arm round Bee—for the first time since she had been a tiny child, and he a lad just beginning life, with his heart unawakened.

Away they floated down the room to the melting rise and fall of the fairy-like music, on—on—without stopping—without speaking. And to one of them, at least, that waltz was heaven.

For a time she was his, he thought, in a passionate trance of present bliss. She might belong to another man, he might belong to another woman, but for this one little quarter of an hour not even her lover might hold her nearer.

"*Who knows but the world may end to-night?*" The familiar words rang dreamily through his brain.

Once a light loosened tendril of her hair

swept across his lips. He hardly dared to breathe, lest he should displace it. Once she spoke to him—some trifling words whose import he did not catch.

"Hush!" he muttered, holding her yet closer.

On—on they swept in rhythmical, even measure. The music had passed into a weird wailing minor, that seemed to stab the heart and wring it with sad half-forgotten memories. A vague depression, deepening almost to fear, came over Bee. Her companion's utter silence, the almost convulsive clasp of his arm and of the hand that held hers, gave to the dance the semblance of a long, passionate embrace.

"Douglas!" she whispered breathlessly. "Douglas! don't hold me so tightly; I don't like it. You are hurting me. Let us rest now."

Still without speaking, he steered their steps to a heavily-curtained doorway leading into a small ante-room, half lit, and dim, and cool, with plants and jars of ice placed here

and there. He whirled her into the damp grateful stillness, his arm still holding her closely to him. The arm was trembling, and his face was grey with a ghastly pallor. His eyes Bee did not see; the long lashes hid their passionate downward gaze. Perhaps it was as well. His arm clasped her closer—closer. He bent his head until his face almost touched hers.

"Bee," he whispered huskily, "you asked me to kiss you a few days ago—and I would not. Will you kiss me—now?" Then quite suddenly he let her go. "No—no," he muttered agitatedly. "Good God! What a brute I am!"

Bee, half-amazed, half-frightened, stood for a second or two in utter bewilderment. What had come to grave, quiet Douglas?

He had flung himself into a chair, and hidden his face. His breath was coming hard and quick. One hand covered his eyes; the other, as it lay upon his knee, shook perceptibly.

"Is anything the matter, Douglas?" Bee

said in a puzzled tone, moving towards him, and laying her hand somewhat timidly on his arm.

He looked up at her then. The passionate light had died out of his eyes, and he looked tired and old.

"Is anything the matter?" she repeated anxiously.

"No—nothing is the matter," he said moving slightly away from her gentle touch.

"Were you faint—or giddy?" she went on wonderingly. "Why did you not stop sooner?"

"I couldn't," he answered, harshly enough.

He was sitting with bent head, and hands loosely clasped in front of him. Truly, there was not much of the successful lover or the brilliant author about him just now.

"Douglas, do you know, I think you work too hard," observed Bee, after a short pause. "You are sometimes quite queer and unlike yourself. And just now, when you ought to be so happy—why, do you know that you are looking simply *wretched?*"

"Am I?" he said in an odd voice. "That is very strange."

"It is simply that you are working yourself to death," pursued Bee severely. "You should remember that you have Fay to think of now, as well as yourself."

"I am remembering that," he made answer quietly. He rose as he spoke, and pushed the short, thick hair wearily back from his forehead.

"Why, even Cyril noticed to-night——" began Bee, and stopped short. For Douglas had turned white with sudden anger.

"Cyril!" he repeated between his teeth. "By what right does he criticize my looks and actions? Is it not enough that he has——" Then with an effort he controlled himself, and said in a softened voice, "I beg your pardon, Bee. Forgive me. I don't know what's the matter with me to-night."

"Poor old fellow!" said Bee, mollified at once. "I believe you have a dreadful headache. So of course you feel cross and out of sorts."

Just then their retreat was invaded by Miss Leyden and her latest capture—a stalwart lieutenant of dragoons, who appeared to be as hopelessly in the toils as could be desired, and glared ferociously at Douglas over an enormous black moustache. The latter returned the glare with less ferocity and more *hauteur*, and silently conveyed Bee back to the dancing-room, where he relinquished her to a reproachful youth, who, it appeared, had been looking for her "everywhere."

Douglas went in search of Fay, to whom he was engaged for the next two dances. He could not find her—and he was very glad. So he went out into the grounds, which were bathed in the peaceful light of the pale shy moon. It was almost warm to-night. Not a breath of wind was stirring; but the air was singularly fresh and sweet, and the gardens looked like fairyland. Douglas, however, was in no mood to appreciate their beauties. He walked restlessly up and down the terraced walks for some time; then he went

indoors and found his way to the morning-room, which was lit only by the firelight, being one of the few rooms not thrown open to the guests. He flung himself upon a sofa near the fire and abandoned himself to harassing thought. Was this sort of thing to go on always?—he wondered fiercely. And if so, would it be possible to make Fay, his wife, his other self, his heart's companion as long as they both should live, while all the man in him cried out for that other woman so soon to be a wife—but not his? Then honour and common-sense made their whispers heard above the fierce voice of passion. He must accept the inevitable. It was too late to rebel—now. He must crush as best he might his love for Bee. He must make up his mind to be a loyal and tender husband—if not a loving one—to Fay. Otherwise—what lay before him?

Our lives are for the most part what we make them, you know. "When one has not what one likes, it is necessary to like what one has"—or, at least to behave as if one

liked it. It is rather a dreary motto, perhaps. But surely it is better to get up and kick circumstances, than lie still and let circumstances kick you. It is pluckier, at all events. Douglas, however, did not feel like kicking anything just now. The rebellious mood had passed, and he was weighed down by an overwhelming sadness—the ineffable sadness of knowing that life must henceforth be taken up on a consciously lower level.

"Poor little Fay!" he reflected, as he lay staring into the fire. She was not to blame for the snarl things had got themselves into. And she loved him. Well—he was in a mood to find dreary comfort even in that fact. Perhaps when she was his wife—the mother of his children—perhaps, then, that other woman's face would cease to haunt him.

And at this point in his self-communings, Fay herself came to him.

"Bee says you have a bad headache, Douglas," she said anxiously, as she knelt beside the sofa. "No—don't rise. Have you?"

"Yes, I believe I have," he said in an

exhausted kind of way. And, indeed, his temples were throbbing painfully. He sat up as he spoke and leaned his elbow on the arm of the sofa.

The firelight shone full on his face, and Fay went on softly:

"I'm afraid it must be very bad, dear. You look quite white and ill. Can I do anything for you?"

"No, thank you. It is nothing—nothing of any consequence." Then he added, "This was our dance, was it not? Do you mind remaining here instead of dancing?"

"Not at all," she answered in a low voice. "I should like it. And indeed, I don't think you ought to dance any more to-night."

"Fay, I want to talk to you a little," he said after a minute.

"Yes, Douglas."

But whatever he had to say, he did not say it for some time. Fay took one of his hands in hers and waited patiently.

It was wonderful what a change love had wrought in this hitherto somewhat cynical,

worldly-minded, and seemingly undemonstrative girl. It is just such natures as hers, though, that fling themselves abjectly in the dust before their idols, heedless of the inadequate return they may get for their adoration, thankful if only they may bedew the feet of clay—which surely even they must one day see—with their kisses and their tears.

Fay had not realized, as yet, how little Douglas had to give her in return for her love. He was not a demonstrative lover, certainly, but his—so she argued against her heart—was not a demonstrative nature. She did not know, you see, that all men are demonstrative at one period, at least, of their lives. She only knew that she was blest beyond all women. For was she not going to be his wife? And would he have asked her to be his wife if he had not loved her? Had he not other things to think of besides the making of love, and pretty speeches? For at this time she was very proud of her talented lover.

With a sudden passionate impulse she bent

her head, and pressed her lips to the hand she held. Douglas started violently, for his thoughts had been far away; then, leaning towards her, he drew her gently within his arm. She quivered with joy at the unwonted caress, and let her head droop lower—lower until it rested on his shoulder.

"I love you! I *love* you!" she murmured.

"I am afraid, my little Fay, that you love me more than I deserve," he made answer somewhat sadly.

She did not speak—only looked up at him with eyes so full of love and trust that his heart smote him with a keen sense of his own unresponsiveness. He smoothed back her hair with a light uncaressing touch, and he still kept his arm round her. He did not kiss her. He had never kissed her, with the exception of that one cold touch of his lips on the night he had asked her to marry him. And over this defection she had often wondered.

"Fay," he said abruptly, almost nervously, "we are going to spend our lives together—

together until death shall part us. I want to tell you—to warn you. Don't expect too much of me. I—I am not a very good-tempered fellow, I'm afraid. I'm not a particularly good fellow—in any way; not in the least the kind of fellow you think I am. There will be days probably when I shall be unreasonable and gloomy, and very likely cold and unloving. Don't be disappointed — don't be vexed — when these days come. Just let me alone. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said, a little smile creeping round her mouth — "I understand. You mean that some days you will feel that you can't be bothered with me. But that is one of the penalties of marrying an author, I suppose?" she added with a half-sigh. "One must come second."

There was a short silence; then Fay said quite suddenly, but with an unwonted shyness in her voice:

"Douglas, why do you never—kiss me?"

A quick displeased frown contracted his

forehead. Her words jarred upon him, and dispelled the faint tenderness that had arisen in his heart for her.

"Have I indeed been so remiss?" he said coldly. "That is easily remedied." And as he spoke he brushed her cheek lightly with his moustache.

So light and chill was this caress, indeed, that Fay passionately wished her impulsive words unspoken. Her face flushed painfully, and she stammered in dire confusion:

"Forget that I said that, Douglas. I—I don't know why I did. It was only silliness."

Douglas did not say anything—simply because nothing suitable occurred to him to say. He was not a man of ready speech at any time. And shortly afterwards Fay left him and went up to her room, where she cried herself into such a pitiable object that her going downstairs again that night was utterly out of the question.

The first cold breath of a vague disappointment had touched her. A little—a very little—of the bloom had been brushed off her

perfect bliss. But what will you? In this world we must learn to enjoy our happiness, as well as our plums, with the bloom off. It doesn't materially affect the taste, you know. And yet—must we wait for Paradise before we see any perfect thing of which the perfection does not fade as we touch it? I suppose we must.

* * * * *

"I always feel so *wormish* after a dance," yawned Bee late on the afternoon of the following day, as she flung her book upon the hearthrug and leaned back in her chair with her hands behind her head.

"That's because you dance," observed Miss Leyden briskly. "You shouldn't dance. Then you'd be as fresh as a daisy next day."

She herself, by the way, never, or hardly ever, danced at all, but deliberately "sat out," with carefully selected partners, all through her programme.

"Well, but what does one go to a dance for," objected Bee lazily, "if not to dance?"

"One goes to a dance to make havoc in

the heart of one's enemy—*man!*" said the other, making a naughty little face. "At least *I* do. And I find I can do it better by 'sitting out' than by dancing. It's all very well for beauties to fly about the room until every grain of powder is off their faces, and every bit of curl out of their fringes. They remain beauties, in whatever guise. But I, minus powder and curls, am a diabolical fright, and I have the sense to know it. So there you are, you know. I never do more than one dance—a waltz. It's a fixed principle with me—all my men know it; and if the new ones don't, they get to know it," she concluded saucily.

"And who was the favoured recipient of your one waltz last night?" inquired Bee, regarding the speaker curiously.

"Let me see. Oh, *your* young man, Sir Cyril. He isn't brilliant—you'll forgive me saying that, won't you?—but he *can* waltz. I sat out two dances with the young man who writes," she added, after a pause, "Mr. —Mr. Conrath. He is rather nice, you know,

and doesn't at all try to do the superior literary swell. I asked him if he would put me in his next book. I wonder if he will!"

"No, I'm quite sure he won't," said Fay Dinwoodie rather sharply.

She was sitting in a cosy oaken recess at one side of the fireplace, shading her face from the glow of the fire with a screen of peacock's feathers.

They were all in the morning-room—all the women, I mean. The men were conspicuous by their absence. Miss Leyden turned towards Fay with a rippling little laugh and said:

"I didn't see you, Miss Dinwoodie, in that secluded corner. (I *love* these corners so; don't you?) You and Mr. Conrath are going to be married, are you not?" she added, with a contemplative air. "Good gracious! what a blush! It's years since I blushed like that."

Fay did not answer. Her blush soon faded and gave place to her former unbecoming pallor. She was looking tired and heavy-

eyed to-day, as if her night's sleep had not refreshed her—which, indeed, it had not.

A tall, lackadaisical-looking young woman here separated herself from a small group near the window and approached the fire.

"I think it's so interesting being in the house with two newly engaged couples," she said glancing sentimentally from Bee to Fay. "How happy you must both be! I was once engaged myself, you know," she added, with a sigh—"so of course I know all about it."

"*Once!*" echoed the irrepressible Miss Leyden, raising her well-marked eyebrows. "It takes more than once, I can tell you, to know all about it. I'm not sure that I know all about it—and I've been engaged more times than I can remember."

Bee picked up her book again and smoothed out the leaves, her lip curling scornfully the while. Her hostess laughed. She was one of the few women who liked Miss Leyden, and always maintained that she was the kindest-hearted little woman in the

world—where the matter of breaking men's hearts was not concerned.

Just then the door opened, and a few of the men entered—among them Douglas, who seated himself beside Fay in the gathering darkness.

"Fenwicke and I are leaving to-night," he said in a low voice, "by the 6.50. We have had rather bad news from those mines I told you of, and Max thinks we ought to be there."

"To-night!" she said, with keen disappointment in her tone. "Oh, Douglas, *must* you go?"

"Well, it's not a matter of life and death," he said, laughing a little; "but I think I'd better go. I intended leaving to-morrow or the day after, you know," he added carelessly, "so it won't make much difference."

Fay gazed at the fire, which she saw through a misty veil of tears.

"Shall you write to me?" she whispered.

"Certainly, if you wish it. Not that I shall have much to write about. There isn't

much going on down there that would interest you." Then in an altered tone he went on, trying to catch a glimpse of her averted face in the semi-darkness, "Why, you foolish girl, what is the matter? You will see me again very soon."

But Fay did not answer.

Douglas and Fenwicke left that night, the latter evidently in the lowest spirits, the reason for which I shall explain later.

"Tell you what it is, Bee," observed Cyril as he bade that young lady good-night some hours later—"Conrath is going to make a regular fool of himself over those mines of Fenwicke's. As an engaged man he has no right to throw away the little money he has in such tomfoolery."

"How do you know that it is tomfoolery?" returned Bee hotly. "He and Mr. Fenwicke told me all about it, and I think it must be a splendid mine. If Douglas thinks he can make more money by spending some, I think he is quite right."

"Pooh! Nonsense!" said Cyril con-

temptuously. "What can you possibly know of such things? As likely as not there is no mine at all."

Whereupon Bee, who was feeling inexplicably cross and desolate, flew into a passion (I'm afraid she was still something of a vixen!) and showed herself in all respects quite prepared for a violent quarrel.

But Cyril was rather a difficult person to quarrel with. He watched her angry little face for some time in silence, then observed tranquilly:

"Our friends Conrath and Fenwicke would be flattered, would they not, if they knew the storm their mining operations have raised? Calm yourself, my dear child. You will be an old woman at thirty if you exhaust all your emotions as you do your—er—temper. You needn't try to get up a quarrel with me, you know. I couldn't quarrel with you to-night if I tried my level best."

"No — that's just it!" burst out Bee passionately. "One might as well try to

make an impression on a piece of india-rubber."

"Well, india-rubber has its good qualities," was the imperturbable reply. "It would never do if we were both firebrands. We should be reduced to ashes in no time. Come, look your own sweet little self, and say good-night to me prettily."

He took her hands as he spoke, and drew her laughingly towards him.

And she, with a repentant sense of her own unwarrantable "crossness," submitted with a resigned little sigh, and allowed herself to be said good-night to her as her lover would—and that ceremony took some time.

* * * * *

Matters at Poldornalupe were looking sufficiently serious. Some accident had occurred (the nature of which I forget), necessitating some rather costly repairs. And worse still, the lode on which the mine's owners had built so many aerial castles had disappeared, leaving "not a trace behind." Add to this blank prospect the fact there

were symptoms of discontent among the miners, and it will be seen that there really were sufficient reasons for Fenwicke's temper being less sweet than usual.

Dinner—if I may dignify by that name the singular meal which Mrs. Potts placed before our friends—passed in comparative silence. Then, when Fenwicke had partially relieved his feelings by some exceedingly powerful remarks to the above-mentioned worthy female, he lit his pipe, crossed his legs, and relapsed into noiseless gloom.

Conrath was walking up and down the room, formulating his ideas as to some abstruse subject on which he had an article due for one of the magazines on the following day.

When some time had elapsed, Fenwicke's pent-up feelings found relief in speech.

"Of all dangerous, undependable, deceitful creatures on this earth, commend me to women!" he broke out suddenly and savagely. "There's no understanding them —no finding them out. They are a mass of

lies and deception from head to foot, and their sole mission is to send men to the devil!" And the speaker dashed his pipe upon the ground and buried his face in his hands.

Douglas paused in his promenade, and regarded his friend with pardonable amazement.

"Why, my dear fellow," he said, with a suspicion of unwilling laughter in his voice, "this is an entirely new line for you! I thought you rose superior to feminine blandishments?"

"Oh, yes," returned the other indignantly, "I daresay. Do you think I don't hear you laughing? Of course it's comic — awfully comic—to think of Max Fenwicke being in love with a woman. But it's true, for all that."

Douglas sat down, and struck a match, for his pipe had gone out. He knew he should hear the whole of Fenwicke's grievance presently, so he only said:

"I'm very sorry, old man; at least, I'm sorry you're so cut up about it. But—er—is the case quite hopeless?"

The person addressed made an impatient movement, signifying that the case was quite hopeless, then raised his head, stood up, and kicked an obtrusive piece of coal which overhung the grate.

"I swore—years ago—that I would never put myself in any woman's power again," he observed gloomily. "I had a lesson then enough to last any man his lifetime. Shows what an infernal fool I must be."

"Is it — er — Miss Leyden?" inquired Douglas.

"Oh, yes, it's Miss Leyden—cursed little flirt," was the savage answer. "I could have sworn she cared for me. And when I—er—spoke to her this afternoon, I'll be hanged if she didn't tell me she's engaged to one of these baboons from Windsor!" And the speaker cast himself into his chair again.

"She certainly is a fearful flirt," observed Douglas, recalling certain looks and speeches during the two dances he had sat out with the young lady in question on the previous

evening. "She's not worthy of you, old fellow. Forget about her."

"Oh, yes, I daresay—that's so easy, isn't it?" returned the other sarcastically. "Suppose I told you to forget about Fay Dinwoodie? You'd do it, I suppose—like a shot?"

Douglas smiled somewhat grimly.

"However," continued Fenwicke, picking up his pipe, which fortunately proved to be uninjured, and looking about for a match, "I feel better now I've told you about it. And after all, I've an idea she would have led me a awful life. They always do. I'm afraid you'll find it so, old chap. I never was so surprised in my life as when you told me you were engaged."

Douglas was silent.

"I hope you won't repent it, you know," resumed Fenwicke, squaring his shoulders, and plunging his hands into his pockets. "Most fellows do."

The other smiled slightly.

"Aren't you going a little on the line of the

fox who lost his tail?" he said, leaning forward to fill his pipe anew.

"Ah, well—perhaps," was the somewhat rueful answer. "However—a truce to women and their devilries for the present. Look here, Conrath, we must try and raise some more money. I had no idea that mining was so confoundedly expensive. It swallows up coin like the very deuce."

"But if the lode has disappeared," said Douglas (who had only a vague idea as to what a lode might be), "do you think it is worth while to go on?"

"Of course it's worth while," exclaimed Fenwicke irritably. "As Dempster says, its only a 'fault.' We'll find it again. Good Heavens, man, you wouldn't have us abandon the thing now, after all we've spent on it? I'm confident there's a fortune before us, if we only persevere."

"I shall be able to put in something by-and-bye," observed Douglas, after a pause—"when I get my new book finished. I'm to have a pretty fair sum for it. But I can't do

anything in the meantime. By the way, Debenham might. He's come into some money, and wants to invest part of it."

"By Jove!—does he, though!" exclaimed Fenwicke excitedly. "Then I'll tell you what—we'll wire him first thing in the morning to come down. I remember meeting him once or twice. A quiet, decent kind of fellow—knows something of mining, too, if I remember rightly."

Accordingly a telegram was despatched on the following morning to Debenham, who joined our friends at Poldornalupe a couple of days later.

It was satisfactory to find that on inspection he shared Fenwicke's opinion regarding the mine. If he was not as enthusiastic, he was at least as sanguine—as he showed by agreeing to pay for the working thereof for the next six months, stipulating, however, that, in the event of the thing turning out a success, a third of the profits was to be his.

To those who knew him well there was a

subtle but unmistakable change in Ralph Debenham. He was quiet and languid as of old; but his eyes had lost their hopeless look, and he had altogether the air of one from whose shoulders a well-nigh intolerable burden had fallen.

In the evening, while Max was busy with some intricate calculations, Debenham said suddenly:

"Come out for a turn, Conrath. There's a splendid moon, and—I want a walk."

They went out together, crossed the weed-grown carriage-drive, and took a short cut through a turnip field to the road, which the moon had whitened into a glorious track of silver, flanked by the thick darkness of the hedges. It was somewhat frosty, and their footsteps rang sharply through the moonlit silence. Neither spoke for some time; then Debenham said in a slow, deliberate kind of way:

"I have had news—since I saw you last. I don't suppose it will occur to you to imagine what it is. So I shall tell you. It is about my—wife. She is—dead."

Douglas turned quickly, and looked at him without speaking.

Debenham smiled, a curious still smile.

"You are not quite sure whether you ought to congratulate me or not?" he said. 'Well—you may. Her death is a matter of deep thankfulness to me. Not even when I saw her lying stiff and cold in her coffin did the slightest feeling of tenderness revive in my heart for her. And yet, poor girl, I loved her—once."

"It has been hard lines for you," said Douglas when they had walked some little way in silence.

"Ah, it has been hard," answered Debenham in an almost passionate underbreath—"bitterly, cruelly hard. But, thank God, it is over—like an evil dream. And so let it rest." Then he added in an altered voice, "But about yourself, Douglas. Someone told me you were engaged to be married. Is it true?"

"Yes," the other made answer after a pause —"it is true enough."

His companion looked at him attentively for a second or two.

"Is it—to little Bee?" he said.

"No—it is not to little Bee."

"Do you know—I'm very much surprised," continued Debenham slowly.

"Are you? Why?"

"Well, my dear fellow, to tell you the truth, I had got it into my head somehow that you cared for her, and—well, it just shows how one may be mistaken."

"Yes, it just shows," replied Douglas somewhat grimly. "Miss Adeane has been consecrated to Northburgh, so to speak, for some time. They are now definitely engaged, and are to be married early next year, I believe. As for me—I am going to marry Fay Dinwoodie. At least, I am going to marry her when her mother considers that I can afford to do so. In the meantime—we are engaged."

Debenham did not answer. There was a curiously rigid look on his face, and as he removed his cigar from his lips, his hand shook visibly.

Presently Douglas spoke again.

"Are you not going to congratulate me?" he said in an expressionless voice.

The other started.

"Of course I congratulate you," he answered. "I hope you will both—be very happy."

"Some of these days I hope to congratulate you," said Douglas, after rather a long silence. "You told me once—do you remember?—that there was a woman you were fond of—a woman you would have married if you had been free. I hope that—er—that it will be all right now."

Debenham shivered slightly, and threw away his cigar.

"Oh no," he said very quietly. "That is all over."

The words fell with a somewhat dreary sound on the stillness. Douglas could find no other words to answer them.

"It is chilly," said Debenham after a few silent minutes had passed. "Shall we turn back?"

They walked back to the house without speaking a single word. Debenham, indeed, was strangely silent all the rest of the evening.

But then he was never a talkative fellow.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH BEE IS IMPRUDENT.

"Faithful she is, but she forsakes;
And fond, yet endless woe she makes;
And fair, but with this curse she's crossed,
To know her not till she is lost!"

—George Meredith.

"He smiled as men smile when they will not speak
Because of something bitter in the thought."

—E. B. Browning.

An undesirable contingency at an indefinite distance never holds such vivid possibilities of unpleasantness as a similar contingency which a comparatively few to-morrows will certainly turn into a contingency of to-day. There are so many Micawberish "perhapses" lying between.

Thus Bee had hitherto looked upon her marriage as an event which was as yet too far in the future to be an actively disagreeable prospect, though a steadily nearing one. Some of us may have felt the same in

contemplating death, old age, or imminent bankruptcy.

But it so happened that Cyril—who, after the manner of his unhappy sex, no sooner got what he asked for than he straightway felt entitled to ask for as much again — now began to chafe at what he justly felt was an unnecessary delay, and pressed Bee to consent to their marriage in the early summer. And in this old Chandleur fully concurred.

"I'll have no shilly-shallying," the latter had said to Bee only two days ago. "The fellow wants to be married soon—and very natural, too. And marry him you shall, my girl—or maybe he'll be crying off altogether. And that'll be a nice tale for your friends—that your fine lover's jilted you. You take your chance when you have it. No other young sprig of aristocracy 'll want to marry you—*I'll* go bail."

Bee bit her tongue until it bled, that she might not speak the hot furious words that rushed to her lips. Her grandfather had

been strangely moody and irritable of late. He seemed to be relapsing into even more than his old coarseness of speech and action, and on several occasions had given way to such terrible fits of passion—especially when his potations had been somewhat deeper than usual—that neither his wife nor Bee had dared to cross him in any way whatever.

Bee sat late in her room that night—thinking.

"Why do I shrink so from marrying Cyril?" she asked herself over and over again. "It is so different with Fay. She says she would marry Douglas to-morrow if he wished it. And I suppose that is how one ought to feel."

She rose and walked restlessly up and down for a long, long time—until she heard the clocks strike three. Then all at once she flung herself into a chair, her hands clasped hard and tightly on her lap.

"I don't love him," she whispered under her breath—"I don't love him. And I should never come to love him—*never!* Not

in that way. I like him—I like him very much. But if I married him—I should *hate* him. Ah! what shall I do? If I had only some one to advise me—to *tell* me what to do!" And the poor girl broke into bitter, silent weeping.

Next morning, when Cyril paid his almost daily visit, he found her so heavy-eyed and wretched-looking, that he almost drove her mad by his affectionate anxiety. For the apparently cold-hearted Cyril could be very tender and affectionate upon occasion, and his unwilling little bride-to-be had wound herself very tightly round his heart, or his fancy, or his passions — or perhaps all three.

"My dear girl—you are ill," he said in a deeply concerned voice. "You ought to have a thorough change—instead of looking forward to a fatiguing London season. I can't have you looking like that. Be a dear sensible little woman, now, and let us be married quietly out of hand—say in a fortnight; and then I can carry you off to some

quiet place on the Continent, or anywhere you like, and——"

But she interrupted him by an almost hysterical passion of sobs, which dismayed and alarmed him so much that for some time he thought of nothing but soothing her, totally ignoring her tearful assurances that she was quite well, and didn't want any change, and that she was very, very unhappy, and didn't want to be married at all.

To all this Cyril only murmured a few loving words now and then—stroking her hair the while with exasperating tenderness. To poor Bee this was far worse than any other mode of procedure would have been. It seemed as if an invisible net were closing round her—a net which she could not break away from, for its meshes were hard and strong as steel. And when Cyril at last rose to go—he took her in his arms and gently but deliberately kissed her mouth. Somehow she felt too weak and too miserable to resist him. That kiss seemed to knit the meshes nearer and closer still.

* * * * *

Conrath got home that night in a somewhat depressed mood. He had again been spending a few days at Poldornalupe, and had left Fenwicke there, full of hope, and enthusiasm, and plans. Conrath himself was worried about one or two things—amongst others his book, which had suddenly come to a standstill, owing to the author's discontent with what he had already written. As a matter of fact, it was the best thing he had done; but he was out of sorts, had been working too hard, and was in consequence inclined to look upon everything with a jaundiced eye. For very little he would have pitched the whole MS. into the fire—ignoring the fact that he had promised his publishers it should be in their hands within the next fortnight.

When he entered his sitting-room, he uttered a quick sharp exclamation of intense surprise.

For a slim figure in a long fur-trimmed cloak rose from the hearthrug to meet him—a figure with a pale little face, eyes heavy with tears, and the mouth pathetically drooping.

It was Bee, of course. I need hardly tell you that.

As Douglas closed the door, and advanced hastily into the room, she ran towards him, and threw herself almost into his arms.

"Good Heavens, Bee — has anything happened?" he exclaimed anxiously.

"No, no—nothing," she said in a sobbing, breathless kind of way. "At least—nothing new."

He placed her gently in a chair near the fire, and stood leaning against the mantelpiece, looking down at her for a second or two without speaking. It seemed so sweet, so natural, to see her sitting there—the firelight and lamplight flashing on her bright, piled-up hair, her dear little face upturned to his with tear-dimmed trusting eyes, from which the child-look he knew so well had never faded.

"Why have you come here, Bee?" he said in a low agitated voice. "Do you not know how late it is? What on earth——" He stopped.

Her lip quivered; two large tears gathered on her lashes, and fell on the smart evening-gown her cloak only partially concealed.

"You are in some trouble, Bee," Douglas said, bending over her, and making a wild effort to speak calmly. "What is it? Surely something has happened?"

"I am very, very unhappy," she said miserably. "And I could think of no one but you to help me—to advise me."

"But your lover—your future husband—can he not advise you?" he answered coldly. "And do you think, Bee, that he will like your coming here?"

"Oh, I don't care what he likes!" she exclaimed passionately.

"Ah, you have had some quarrel with him, then? Is it that? But, my dear child, why come to me? Don't you know that it is not—that it is not——" He broke off impatiently.

Why should he explain to her innocent mind what a terrible breach of *les convenances* this visit was? Why should he enlighten her

as to what a cruel, cold-hearted world would say to it? She knew no harm in it, bless her! Was it not natural that she should come to him if she were in trouble, as she used to do long, long ago? Did it not show that the memory of their childish companionship was strong upon her still?

But she had seen the cloud on his brow as he spoke, and noted the vexed compression of his lips.

"Ah, Douglas!" she said reproachfully, "to whom should I come, if not to you? But if it displeases you—if you have other things to think of than me and my—my insignificant troubles, then of course, I can go. I—I don't want to be a trouble to you." She rose as she spoke, and drew her cloak round her with hands that trembled.

"Bee—you are unjust," he said gently, laying his hands on her shoulders, and making her face him. "You know very well that nothing concerning you is ever a trouble to me. But, my dear, do you not understand that—that it is different now from

the old days when we were children? You *must* know that, Bee," he continued very earnestly. "You must know, too, that—that it is not considered the thing for young ladies to visit men in their lodgings at night. Good Heavens! what am I saying to you — you pretty innocent child——" He broke off suddenly, beginning to pace the room with quick uneven steps

"But, Douglas" — remonstrated Bee, regarding him with wide-open, startled eyes, and a considerably heightened colour, "of course I should never dream of going to any one else—not even Cyril," blushing more deeply still. "But you—you are quite different. Why, you are my dear old brother —at least the only brother I ever knew."

"That is nonsense," he returned, his face pale and very stern. "You know — every one knows—that I am *not* your brother."

Bee began to be a little frightened at the nature of the escapade she had committed.

"I see," she said after a pause. "I see. People might — might wonder. And——"

She stopped, her face crimson. "I—I won't come again Douglas," she added, looking down nervously at the carpet. "But—as I am here—will you let me tell you how wretched I am? No, don't say I must go—not for a minute or two. Ah, Douglas—be a brother to me just for to-night, and tell me what I ought to do." And she began to sob broken-heartedly.

Her sobs cut him to the quick.

"Don't!" he said somewhat unsteadily. "Don't cry. Tell me your trouble—and if I can help you in any way, I will. Have you quarrelled with Sir Cyril? Or have you broken off your engagement and then repented, my impulsive little Bee? Or" —frowning—"has he been unkind to you?"

"Oh no, no," she made answer wearily. "He is kindness itself—and I am sure he would never dream of quarrelling with me. As for my engagement being broken off—I wish with all my heart it were!" she concluded passionately.

"You—you do not love him, then?" he

said, speaking with a calmness he was far from feeling. "You were mistaken in thinking you cared for him. It is a little hard on him—is it not?"

"But, Douglas, I told him at Haricott Hall that I was afraid I did not love him enough. And he—he did not seem to mind. He said that I should come to love him—afterwards."

"And—you did not?"

"I did not want to *marry* him," sobbed the poor child. "And I don't want to marry him now. And he—he wants me to marry him quite soon. He spoke of a fortnight! Think of it, Douglas—a *fortnight!* And grandfather is so cruel—he says I must. Oh, I wish—*how* I wish—that mammy had lived!"

"I wish to God she had," said Douglas brokenly.

There was a dead silence for a little while. The fire breathed softly. The subdued roar of the streets reached them as sounds in a dream. Bee's sobs had ceased.

Douglas was struggling with a mad un-

governable desire to take the forlorn-looking little creature in his arms—forgetting the bonds that held him—to kiss away her tears, to whisper that his love for her was none of a brother's, but far, far nearer and dearer, and more tender. His little girl! How could he bear to see her tears—her sad childish eyes? He shut his teeth hard on his under-lip. What vision was this he saw in the flickering firelight? A vision that held his heart and senses like a spell. He and she together in some cosy unpretentious home, bearing all adverse times bravely and cheerily because of their love for each other. He and she together slowly climbing the path to fame and perhaps to fortune. How she would help him! how she would inspire him! He and she together, until death's cold hand should part them —for a little while. His brain seemed to reel.

Fay? What of her? She would console herself, doubtless. Women of her type always did. Honour? Where was the honour in swearing to love and cherish one woman with

every pulse throbbing passionate love for another? Sir Cyril? Damn Sir Cyril!

He drew a long shuddering breath.

"Bee," he said in a low trembling voice—"is it—that you love some one—else? Is *that* why you cannot marry Cyril? Has another love come into your heart, my little one?"

"Oh no, no," she answered impatiently. "I don't love any one—in that way. *Must* one be in love with some one? It is so silly. I want to be free—quite, quite free. I don't want to have any more lovers as long as I live."

Douglas smiled—a queer ghost of a smile. The vision had faded.

After a minute he said, without looking at her:

"But are you sure you are not making a mistake, Bee? Sir Cyril is a very good fellow—and very fond of you. Of course it is only natural that he should wish to have you all to himself as soon as possible—especially as there is no reason for delay."

"Then," said Bee somewhat defiantly—

"you would advise me to marry a man I do not love?"

"No," he answered quietly. "But I think you do love him—though you do not know it. Take care what you are doing, Bee. Don't break your lover's heart for a mere fit of petulance—or because you don't know your own mind. Men don't—get over these things so easily—as women think."

"I fancy I see Cyril breaking his heart," returned Bee derisively. "His is much too well-regulated a heart to break—or even to crack. It's all very well for you, Douglas," she continued, with a quick catch in her breath. "But suppose you hadn't cared a straw for Fay, and were driven into marrying her? How then? Would you be happy? *Would* you?"

"No," he answered, in a voice that held what seemed to Bee an inexplicable ring of pain—"I don't suppose I should be happy."

"Then how do you think I can be?"

"Because, as I have told you, I think you do care for Sir Cyril. And I think I know

you better than most people do—better even than he does."

He sat down at the table as he spoke, and leaned his head on his hand.

"I don't care for him as Fay does for you," said the girl sadly. "If there is such a thing as this love that one reads of and hears of, why shouldn't I wait and see if it comes to me too? Why must I marry a man just because he and grandfather wish it? You are as bad as the rest of them, Douglas. I thought I should be sure to get some comfort and help from you. But you are so apathetic—so indifferent. You no longer care for me as you used to do. You might spare a little from Fay to help me, I think."

"Do you know how deep your words cut, I wonder?" he said, looking down at her with an expression in his dark eyes that she did not in the least comprehend. "I care for you so much that it breaks my heart not to be able to help you. But, Bee, this is a matter in which no one can help you but yourself. Think carefully if you are not

throwing away your life's happiness for a girl's foolish caprice. But if it is no caprice —if you really cannot love this man—let no one force you to marry him. If he is the man I believe him to be, he himself would not wish it. Explain everything to him; defy your grandfather, if need be; but, for God's sake, let nothing—*nothing!*—persuade you to give yourself body and soul to a man you do not love. Think what the marriage tie is—or if you do not know, get some one to tell you. Think how young you are; think of the long, long years you may have to spend together——" He sprang from his chair, and walked up and down the room, trying to conquer his supreme agitation.

Then all at once he turned and faced her again.

"But why do you take me for your counsellor in your love affairs?" he said almost fiercely. "Do you think I cannot see that all this is the outcome of some petty misunderstanding, and that you love him as well as your cold girlish heart knows how? Why

make *me* judge between you? Have you no pity? Do you not see what a miserable, hunted wretch I am? Do you know that my life is a daily, nightly torture? Why do you come here to madden me with your voice and eyes, and the touch of your hands? To remind me—to remind me——"

He stopped, and flung himself into a chair, horrified at what he had said—dreading the inevitable consequences.

But to Bee the idea that he loved her with a lover's love was so unthought of—so utterly out of the question—that she never dreamt of interpreting his words in that way. Indeed, she attributed to them a very different meaning. For Fay had told her only the day before that Douglas had been quite jealous of the harmless attentions of a guileless youth called Raymond, who persisted in sending her flowers and music and other such innocent trifles; that, in fact, Douglas had been quite cold and stiff and disagreeable over the matter, and had gone down to Cornwall without even bidding her good-bye. As Fay

was evidently intensely unhappy, and in the very lowest possible spirits, Bee naturally concluded that Douglas was in a similar condition, and reproached herself heartily for having worried him with her own affairs. As a matter of fact, Douglas's jealousy had existed only in Fay's imagination, and he had gone down to Poldornalupe at half-an-hour's notice in answer to a peremptory wire from Fenwicke. But, of course, Bee could not know this. She knelt down beside him, and laid her hand on his arm.

"Dear Douglas, forgive me," she said in her sweet vibrating voice. "I might have known that you were depressed and unhappy just now. You are vexed about—about Fay, are you not?"

He looked at her for a moment; then he laughed—a laugh that in a woman would have been hysterical.

"Ah, yes," he said in a voice that Bee hardly recognised—"I am unhappy about Fay, of course. How well you divine my thoughts, Bee."

His face was white—even his lips; and his hands were trembling.

"I must take you home," he said presently in a low voice. "It is late—and they will be anxious about you."

He rose as he spoke; and she rose also, and began to fasten her cloak.

"You look so tired," she said. "I am sorry to take you out. But perhaps you were going out at any rate? Perhaps you were going to see Fay?"

"No," he answered—"I am not going to see Fay to-night."

"She is very unhappy," the girl went on in a low voice.

"Well," he answered moodily—"most of us are unhappy, are we not? Even you, you poor child."

As he spoke he drew her cloak closer about her neck, and fastened it. His heavy eyes met hers for a few brief seconds; and hers were full of tears.

"Ah, Douglas," she said—and her sweet

voice quivered—"I wish we were both children again. Don't you?"

"I don't know," he answered drearily. "Sometimes I almost wish we were both dead."

"*Douglas!*" she exclaimed, with a quick terrified little sob.

"Hush, dear! Of course I didn't mean that," he said, trying to look and speak as usual, and succeeding very badly. "You are not going to cry, are you?" he continued, bending his head to see her downcast eyes and averted face.

And at this most inopportune moment the door opened, and a domestic announced Sir Cyril Northburgh.

There was a very curious expression in Sir Cyril's eyes as he advanced slowly into the room. His face was of an unnatural whiteness, and his nostrils were quivering slightly. But otherwise he was calm and unmoved as usual. Douglas, who possibly had not been man of the world long enough to have his emotions under such complete control,

muttered an ugly word between his teeth, and flushed to the roots of his hair—which, all things considered, was rather unfortunate.

There was an almost imperceptible pause; then both men bowed as slightly as was consistent with good breeding—rather more slightly, indeed.

Sir Cyril, without a shadow of expression on his clear-cut face, addressed Douglas. He had not taken the smallest notice of Bee.

"I promised my cousin to call upon you this evening, Mr. Conrath," he said in his wonted cool even tones (if his voice held a certain unwonted repression, it was barely noticeable). "She is anxious to see you. When you are disengaged, perhaps you can spare her half-an-hour."

Coldly courteous though his words were, there was a nameless something in his face and voice that filled Bee with a chill undefined dread. The anger of these cold, habitually self-contained men is apt at times to be rather a terrible thing. To her dismay,

he turned to leave the room without so much as a glance in her direction.

"Cyril," she said, turning rather white—"are you not going to take me home?"

The poor child's voice quivered. A sick fear of what she had done took possession of her.

Cyril, who would rather have died (figuratively speaking) than be actively rude to a woman, paused at once.

"Certainly," he answered coldly and haughtily—"if you wish it. I thought you would possibly prefer—that your friend should do so."

"One moment!" said Douglas hoarsely (hitherto he had been incapable of speech). "One moment, Sir Cyril! You must allow me to explain that I alone am to blame for Miss Adeane's presence here to-night. She did not know—did not dream of the——" He stopped; for, in truth, lies — even chivalrous lies—did not come readily to his lips.

Sir Cyril's eyes flashed—as only blue eyes *can* flash.

"I do not require Miss Adeane's actions to be explained by you, sir," he said in a tone that made Douglas long to strangle him. "It will be time enough for you to give your explanations when you are asked for them."

The deliberate insolence of his words and manner all but sent Douglas over the boundary of self-control. But, for Bee's sake, he held himself hard in curb—though the thick veins stood out on his temples like whipcord, and his very lips were white with passion.

"You know very well I cannot answer your insulting words here and now," he said, forcing himself to speak quietly—but it was a dangerous quietness. "Perhaps you can make it convenient to see me to-morrow. In the meantime—do not let me detain you. No doubt you have other engagements, and—" glancing at his watch—"if I am to see your cousin to-night, I had better do so at once."

Bee, who had been listening to this passage

at arms with a wildly beating heart, now exclaimed in a passion of terror:

"Oh, don't! *Don't* look at each other like that! Cyril—indeed it was all my fault. Douglas had no idea I was coming. He wanted me to let him take me home ever so long ago—but I would not."

A peculiarly unamiable expression flitted over Sir Cyril's face; but it was gone instantly.

"Mr. Conrath may congratulate himself upon possessing so loyal a champion," he said icily.

One of Douglas's hands was resting on the table. At Sir Cyril's words the strong fingers opened and shut convulsively—otherwise he took no notice.

"Are you ready?" said Cyril, turning to Bee, and speaking in the same cold, indifferent tone as before. "I am sorry to hurry you; but, as Mr. Conrath suggests, I have several other engagements this evening."

For one instant Bee let her hand rest on

Douglas's arm in a mute good-bye. But he removed it gently.

"Go!" he said in a strange panting under-breath.

And without a word she let Cyril take her downstairs, and out into the street.

The clocks were striking the half-hour after nine. Stars were shining, and a touch of frost was in the air. In the next street a barrel-organ was wailing out an old, old waltz-tune. Bee never heard it afterwards without a sick tightening of the heart.

"You had better take my arm," Sir Cyril said, still in that strange unfamiliar voice. "I am afraid we shall have to walk some little way before we get a hansom."

Which, indeed, for some inscrutable reason, proved to be the case.

Bee felt weak and tired. She clung to her lover's arm tremblingly, wishing passionately to be at home, that she might indulge in the feminine weakness of a "good cry."

How white and stern Cyril looked in the pale starlight. What was he going to say to

her? Would he break off their engagement? Just what she had been wishing for, surely. Ah, yes—but she did not want him to take the initiative in the matter. She did not want to be contemptuously cast off as if she had done something disgraceful. And, after all, what had she done? Nothing so very dreadful. And yet—even Douglas had seemed shocked and perturbed to see her there.

If Cyril would only speak! But he did not. And a few minutes later he hailed a passing hansom. The short drive was as silent as their walk had been, and by the time they reached Portland Place, Bee was feeling so nervous that she could have screamed. Fortunately, Mr. and Mrs. Chandleur were dining out, so her absence would pass unchallenged.

Mechanically unfastening her cloak as she went, she made her way to the library, where a large fire was burning.

Sir Cyril followed her into the room and closed the door.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MAN AND THE WOMAN.

"Two soul-sides: one to face the world——
And one to show a woman that he loved her."

* * * *

"When I gazed into these stars, have they not looked down upon me as with pity, like eyes glistening with heavenly tears over the little lot of man?"

—CARLYLE.

"WELL?" said Bee somewhat defiantly.

But her voice trembled, for her nervousness had increased to an almost uncontrollable pitch.

Cyril's continued silence was terrible to her. Perhaps he hardly knew how terrible. As he moved towards her, he was shocked at the ashy whiteness of her face, and the strange look in her eyes. The poor child was beginning to think she had committed some unpardonable social sin, for which who could say what might be the penalty?

"Cyril—for Heaven's sake speak to me,"

she went on almost hysterically. "It is cruel of you to treat me so."

His face softened.

"I did not mean to be cruel," he said quietly. "I did not speak because I feared I might say more than—I ought to say. I have myself pretty well in hand now, so you need not look so terrified," he added with a pained inflection in his calm voice. He paused, then went on, "I confess I was angry, Bee—more than angry—when I found you in that man's rooms to-night. I certainly object to my future wife indulging in such escapades; and did I not know that you are the most childlike and unworldly of women, I should take a very different view of the matter. As it is, I know you meant no harm. But surely even you would not have cared to be found there by any of Conrath's bachelor friends."

"I shouldn't have cared," sobbed Bee wretchedly. "I wanted to see Douglas by himself, and the only way I could do it was to go there."

"And what had you to say to him of such importance, may I ask?" he inquired coldly.

"It was because—because I was so unhappy," she faltered.

"And have I been so unkind to you, Bee, that you never thought of coming to me with your trouble, whatever it was?" he said half-sternly, half-wistfully.

"How could I," she broke out passionately —"when it was about you I wanted to speak to him?—because of you I was so unhappy?"

His face whitened a little.

"Indeed! In what way had I caused you any unhappiness? And if I had—in what way could Mr. Conrath put matters right?" he said, leaning his elbow on the mantelpiece, and looking down at her without a vestige of expression on his handsome features. Only a slight involuntary movement of the hand that hung by his side betrayed any emotion.

There was a pause. Then Bee said desperately:

"Cyril—I—I don't want to marry you. I

—I want to break off our engagement." As she spoke she looked up at him with pathetic imploring eyes.

"Why?" he asked, briefly and sternly.

"Because"—twisting her fingers in a nervous embarrassed fashion — "because I—I don't love you enough."

"Do you love me any less now than you did on the day you promised to marry me?" he went on in a hard voice.

No answer.

But Cyril, Bee found, was not to be trifled with.

"Did you hear me, Bee?" he said, more gently—but with an evident determination to be answered. "Do you dislike me more now than you did then?"

"No—I don't dislike you at all. But you *know* you promised we should not be married for ever so long. And now — you have spoken to grandfather—and he says that as you wish it, I *must* marry you in a fortnight."

"And this was what you wished to consult your—your friend about?"

"Yes."

"And what did he say, may I ask?"

"Oh, I don't remember all he said," she answered, half-wearily, half-petulantly. "He thinks I like you quite enough, it would seem. And he says it is natural that you should want to marry me soon."

After a pause Sir Cyril said gravely:

"If I had known that the thought of our speedy marriage was such a trouble to you, I should certainly never have suggested it. I have no wish to marry you against your will —or to hurry you in any way. But—I shall not allow you to break off our engagement. Unless," looking at her steadily—"there is any one else?"

"Any one else?" she repeated.

"I mean any one else you love, Bee. In that case I shall set you free—at once."

"Oh, no," she said impatiently. "I can assure you there is no one else I want to *marry*—if that is what you mean."

"Ah!" Cyril made answer, drawing a long breath. "Then I shall not give you up—not

while your heart is empty. I may find the way there — some day." Then he added gently, "I must go now. Good-night, Bee. And—if you are troubled or perplexed about anything—come to me, my dear, and trust me to help you to the best of my power."

Then touching her forehead lightly with his lips, he went away. And Bee stood alone in the flickering firelight.

With an impatient little sigh she walked over to the window, pulled aside the curtain, and looked out. The light of the moon lay daintily on the unlovely strip of back-garden, and silvered the grimy walls. Lights twinkled in the back windows of the opposite houses. Through the night came the piteous monotonous crying of a little child. The sound hurt Bee somehow, and tugged at her heart like an actual pain.

* * * * *

On the following afternoon, as Conrath was busily correcting a batch of proofs, Sir Cyril Northburgh's card was brought in, followed almost immediately by that gentleman himself.

The two men greeted each other coldly.

"I understood from what you said last night, Mr. Conrath, that you wished to see me to-day," said Sir Cyril, taking the chair Douglas indicated.

"I did," the other answered, looking straight at his visitor. "From your manner last night I could hardly help seeing that—er—you were annoyed to find Miss Adeane in my rooms." He stopped.

Sir Cyril was regarding him steadily.

"I think I gave you to understand that I required no explanation of Miss Adeane's actions," he said slowly. "That was certainly not my object in calling upon you to-day. I frankly confess that I was something more than annoyed to find her there. That, I imagine, was only natural. But — well, I know from what she has told me that you were not to blame in the matter; and—er—I have a sort of idea," he added with a half-smile, "that I made myself rather unpleasant on the subject last night."

"Well, you did, rather," acquiesced

Douglas, absently making little ink dots on the blotting-paper before him. "But then, you know, I have an idea that so did I."

"Exactly. Perhaps there were excuses for us both," answered Cyril, lighting a cigarette. "So suppose we cry quits. Have you any engagement for to-night?" he added.

"No—not until pretty late."

"Then dine with me at Brooks's, will you?"

"I have a lot to do," the other answered doubtfully, turning his eyes upon the enormous pile of proofs that yet lay uncorrected, the yet more formidable pile of unanswered letters, and recalling voluminous sheets of "copy" to be supplied and sent off by the evening's post.

"Pooh! No man is expected to work after business hours," observed Cyril languidly. "I think you over-do the thing. Fortune won't come any faster for your burning the candle at both ends. Fay says you look fagged to death. And I think myself you look uncommonly seedy."

"All right. I'll come," Conrath said in somewhat curt tones.

Whereupon Cyril rose to go, feeling that he had held out the olive-branch in a particularly conciliating way — and, in a word, done all that could have been expected of him. Nevertheless, as he sauntered downstairs and out into the street, he was conscious of an unconquerable hostility in his feeling towards Douglas Conrath—which hostility, if he had only known, was intensely reciprocated by the object of it.

* * * * *

Shortly before Easter a particularly happy idea occurred to our friend Fenwicke. It was nothing more nor less than that he and Douglas, Cyril, Bee, and Fay, should go down to Poldornalupe to "rough it" during Easter.

"But"—objected Conrath, when this project was laid before him—"we should want some one to chaperone the girls, you know."

"Oh, hang it!—yes, I forgot that," said Fenwicke thoughtfully. "Well—why not get Lady Dinwoodie to go—eh?"

In spite of much coaxing and persuading, however, the latter lady could not be prevailed upon to leave her comfortable home in Bryanstone Square for the wilds of Cornwall. Mrs. Chandleur, therefore, was pressed into the service instead. Mr. Chandleur, to the satisfaction of all, was staying with some farmer cousins in Lincolnshire.

Sir Cyril rather threw cold water upon the idea; but finding himself in the minority, made one suggestion which certainly had common-sense on its side.

"Look here, Fenwicke," he said seriously. "If all the yarns you tell about your old housekeeper down there are true, don't you think it would be as well to—er—take some kind of cook down with you? You know women can't rough it as to food as—er—we can."

Which probably was one word for the women, and two for himself; for Cyril was not at all indifferent to his dinner, and, unless as a matter of necessity, was not particularly fond of roughing it.

"All right," acquiesced the easy-going Max. "It's easy enough to get a cook. I fancy we can put in rather a good time. And if the weather's fine—and with the glass rising as it is, it's pretty sure to be—we can have some boating. The river runs through the grounds, you know, quite handy; and there's a jolly little boat in the boat-house."

For some days before that on which our friends arranged to go down to Poldornalupe, however, the weather was boisterous, cold, and exceedingly wet — which, Fenwicke declared, was a certain proof that it would change almost immediately. As for the barometer remaining steady at "much rain" —well, after all, what was a barometer?

Behold them all, then, in a perfect tempest of wind and rain, descending from a couple of musty flys hired in the village, and being heartily welcomed to Poldornalupe by its light-hearted owner. Then they all streamed into the low-ceilinged old-fashioned dining-room, where some primitive preparations for the evening's meal had been made.

"Dear, dear, this is a poor place," exclaimed Mrs. Chandleur in an undertone to Bee. "But I suppose the drawing-room will be better furnished."

Bee, who knew from Douglas the various deficiencies of Poldornalupe, suppressed the fact that the drawing-room furniture consisted of a few spidery chairs and tables, that the room was minus carpet and curtains, and that it was shockingly damp into the bargain.

"Come now, this is cheerful!" exclaimed the jovial Max, as he advanced towards the hearth, on which blazed an enormous fire. "Nothing like a fire for welcome—eh! Mrs. Chandleur?"

Here the door opened to admit Mrs. Potts, bearing a gigantic dish heaped up with some mysterious compound of stewed meat and vegetables mingled in unappetizing confusion. This she placed upon the table, saying in a deeply-injured voice:

"Which I shall be glad to know, Mr. Fenwicke, if the pusson with the band-box who has just come into the kitching, is to

derange the vittles — or if I'm to do it, accordin' to usual. It's hard when a poor woman's been breaking her back over the fire all day to have a good wholesome dish called 'pig's-wash'—*that* it is!"

And Mrs. Potts wept.

"Ah, Mrs. Potts—how *are* you?" exclaimed Max genially. "Will you show these ladies their rooms? They are tired and cold. I am sure you have got good fires in all the bedrooms. As for the person in the kitchen, she will relieve you of your cooking duties for a few days. Much as we should enjoy a daily repetition of your delicious roasts and stews, we must not impose upon your good nature, Mrs. Potts, by making you work *too* hard —eh?"

Whereupon the worthy Mrs. Potts, much mollified, conducted the ladies to their rooms, where fires hardly inferior in size to that in the dining-room burned cheerily.

Bee and Fay were to share one room. Mrs. Chandleur's was on the opposite side of the corridor. The latter was loud in her

lamentations as to the poverty-stricken look of the place, the draughts, and the primitiveness of the general arrangements. But the girls, being young enough and healthy enough to rough it with impunity, saw prospects of much "fun."

Sir Cyril, however, was in a silent rage. Not, to do him all justice, because he foresaw discomfort for himself—which he plainly did—but because he thought Poldornalupe was an outrageous place to bring ladies to. And as a matter of fact, in the present state of the weather, it was anything but a desirable residence—so much the reverse, indeed, that "the pusson with the band-box," after a brief and disparaging survey of her surroundings, took her departure in high disgust by the next train.

So Mrs. Chandleur, assisted by the girls and the triumphant Mrs. Potts, prepared a somewhat scrambling meal. And as the whole party were by this time exceedingly hungry, all deficiencies were laughed over and forgiven.

They all went to bed early, Fenwicke having proved to his own satisfaction that the weather was certain to be all that could be desired on the following day.

But alas! the morning broke in a renewed tempest of wind and rain. Out-of-door amusement was not to be thought of, and the greater part of the day was spent in looking over the house, which was old enough to be sufficiently interesting, though dilapidated and neglected to a melancholy degree. It was to be "restored," Fenwicke said, when the mines paid.

Poldornalupe stood on one of Cornwall's few level stretches. To the east and west rose the rugged hills, now almost hidden by the blinding rain. The river intersected the grounds within a quarter of a mile of the house; to-day it was swollen and turbid, and —as Fenwicke ruefully discovered during the forenoon — had carried away the bridge, which, to be sure, like everything else at Poldornalupe, was sadly out of repair.

Towards evening every member of the

party was secretly wishing himself or herself at home—with the exception perhaps of Fenwicke, whose mercurial spirits nothing could damp nor subdue. It was decided, however, that if the weather was not improved by the morning, they should take the midday train back to town.

But all night long the wind screamed, and the rain descended in sheets. Sleep was almost impossible.

Sir Cyril, whose bedroom was painfully small, and whose bed, therefore, was unpleasantly near the window, woke up about three in the morning to find a perfect fury of rain playing upon him, in conjunction with a strong and bitterly cold wind. The window, which was latticed and old-fashioned, had blown open, and for some time refused to shut. Cyril, after some ten minutes' grim struggle, consigned the window, Poldornalupe itself, and its happy-go-lucky owner, to eternal perdition, and shiveringly climbed into his moist bed again. He could not sleep, however, for the storm seemed rather to increase

than diminish in violence, and with the first streak of dawn he dressed and went downstairs, where he found his host and Douglas, in their shirts and trousers, literally "baling out" the hall, which presented the appearance of a small sea. (I do not know if I have mentioned that all the rooms opening off the hall at Poldornalupe were raised one step above it?) This being the case, it was no easy matter to get rid of the pool of water in which Fenwicke and Conrath were splashing about. Both were smoking, and betrayed an unconcern which showed their present occupation to be no unusual one.

"Hullo, Northburgh! — just in time," exclaimed Fenwicke, handing him a large earthenware jug. "Take this, and I'll fetch another. Keep pouring all the water you take up, out of that window, there's a good fellow. The front door blew in — it often does in stormy weather—and the whole place is flooded."

"So I see," said Cyril, taking the jug, and fixing his eyeglass more firmly into his right

eye. "My bedroom is in a similar condition."

Douglas — who had been wading in the direction of the hat-stand, now turned, and said hastily:

"By Jove!—where are the girls sleeping?"

"At the other side of the house," answered Max reassuringly. "They'll be all right."

"Hadn't we better go and see if they *are* all right?" observed Sir Cyril, pausing in the act of scooping up a jugful of water.

"I'll go," said Douglas. "Are they in the west corridor?"

Fenwicke nodded, and his friend went upstairs in haste, just in time to find Mrs. Chandleur, in an awe-inspiring night-cap and dressing-gown, preparing to descend.

"Whatever is the matter?" the old lady said, with some acerbity of look and tone. "I'm sure I've been lying quaking for I don't know the time, thinking burglars were in the house. *What?* The water's got into the hall? Well — I will say, of all the places to ask ladies to come to! There's the wind been

banging at my window the whole blessed night — until my nerves are all nowhere; not to speak of the rain pouring down the chimney, putting out the fire. And now the whole place is flooded! I'm sure I wish to goodness we'd stayed at home."

Just then Fay's head peeped cautiously out of her room.

"Is anything the matter, Douglas?" she said nervously. "We heard your voice, and——"

"No, no — nothing particular," he answered hastily. "Is the rain coming into your room? Or have you escaped the general deluge?"

"No — we are all right," was the shivering reply — "except that we have hardly had a wink of sleep because of the storm. It seems as though the whole house were shaking."

And, indeed, as she spoke a furious blast shook the rickety old building almost to its foundations.

A moment later Bee rushed past Fay into the corridor.

"Douglas — Douglas!" — she exclaimed breathlessly — "do you know that the river has overflowed its banks—that it is spreading fast — in another few minutes it will have reached the house?"

"Good God!" exclaimed Douglas, dashing without ceremony into the room the girls had just left. Like a flash, he remembered hearing one of the miners speak of a time, six years ago, when the river had burst its bounds, flooding the village and the surrounding district, and causing fearful desolation generally.

The dawn was strengthening rapidly, and a glance from the uncurtained window told him that Bee's words were only too true. The swollen waters were within a stone's throw of the house.

With a few reassuring words (which he was far from endorsing) to the terrified women, he ran down stairs. Halfway, he met Fenwicke and Sir Cyril coming up; the former two steps at a time — the latter, with as much haste as he ever did anything.

While Fenwicke and Conrath stood in hurried consultation, Cyril went at once to Bee—who was only half-dressed, and huddled up in a shawl. She was very pale, and her teeth were chattering audibly, half from cold, and half from fear. Fay was equally pale and cold and frightened, but her cousin ignored her completely. He wrapped Bee's shawl more closely round her throat, and said anxiously:

"You didn't get wet, did you, darling?"

"Not yet," she made answer, half-hysterically. "But I think there is every chance of our getting more than wet—soon. Cyril," —she added, grasping him nervously by the arm—"is there—is there danger, do you think?"

"I can't tell you, dear," was the hurried answer. "I wish to Heaven," he added between his teeth, "that that fool had never persuaded us to bring you here."

"That fool" had meanwhile been debating with Conrath as to what it would be best to do—for matters were looking unpleasantly

serious. In a very short time the rapidly-advancing water would surround the house, which already seemed to sway and totter under the strong blasts of wind that swept round it from time to time.

"Didn't you say there was a boat, Mr. Fenwicke?" said Fay, who, poor little woman, had quite forgotten that her hair was twisted up over her forehead in funny little metal arrangements called, I believe, "curling-pins," and that they were not at all becoming. However, as the only individual in whose eyes she desired to look well had hardly glanced at her, perhaps it didn't matter.

"Yes — there's the boat," Fenwicke made answer — "if we can get at it. But I expect the boathouse will be carried off by this time——"

But Sir Cyril cut him short.

"Can you swim, Fenwicke?" he asked.

"No—I can't," was the blunt reply.

"Very well, then — you remain here with the women, and Conrath and I will see after the boat. It'll be a swimming business before

long," he added in an undertone to Douglas. "The river will flood the whole valley in no time, at the rate it's coming up now."

Even as he spoke the rush of the waters was plainly audible.

Fay sprang forward with a sharp cry.

"Douglas — you won't go?" she said with quivering lips.

"Nonsense," he answered, bending his head to hers, and speaking very gently. "There is no danger, dear. Not so much as there is here, by a long way." And before she could speak, he had followed Sir Cyril and Fenwicke downstairs.

"I'll let you out by the side door," said the latter, as they splashed across the hall. "If we open the other we'll never get it shut again. Hurry all you know," he added hastily.

The other two nodded, and plunged out into the storm. The water met them a few yards from the house in brown foaming waves. By the dim morning light one could see that it had spread far over the sur-

rounding fields, leaving only the tops of the hedgerows visible.

Conrath and Sir Cyril looked at each other.

"The house won't stand an hour," said the former agitatedly. "Come on, Northburgh—we've no more than time."

A sheet of rain and spray flew in their faces as they waded across the submerged lawn. At first the water reached only halfway to their knees — then, owing to a sudden dip in the ground, it took them breast high. A few yards further on they were swept off their feet altogether, and were obliged to trust to their swimming powers. This was difficult, as their feet caught continually in the half-covered shrubs and hedges, which seemed to meet them at every turn. To reach the boathouse they had to cross the shrubbery and two fields. It still, apparently, stood firm; but when they were within a few yards of it, it suddenly rocked and heeled over.

A smothered exclamation broke simultaneously from both men. They were be-

numbed with cold, and pretty well done up, for the wind was strong and in their faces; besides, they were fearfully encumbered by their wet clothing. The next moment a loud dull crash shivered through the air, sounding far above the howl of the wind and the rush of the water.

"Good God! the house is down!" exclaimed Sir Cyril in a voice of agony.

"No — it is only the east wing," Conrath answered. He had caught at an outstanding branch to steady himself as he turned to look backwards. "But it can't stand much longer," he added hoarsely.

The boathouse was now drifting slowly towards the river's current. It seemed hopeless to think of reaching it, though the men strained every nerve, sometimes swimming, sometimes dragging themselves along by the branches of the trees. For a few minutes the great lumbering thing was wedged athwart a hedge, and they bore down upon it with renewed hope. But just as they were within an arm's length, a sudden fierce gust

of wind swept it with swift violence against a sturdy young oak tree. The boathouse was shivered almost to atoms, for it was an old and rickety concern, almost as brittle as touchwood. Both boat and oars, however, were now free, and Sir Cyril, when he had recovered himself somewhat—for he was half-stunned by a blow from the boat's bow—seized one of the oars as it whirled past him. Douglas had already secured the other, and was now making for the boat, which, happily, had been checked in its course by a tangle of half-submerged bushes.

It was no easy task to get on board the tossing little craft, for the wind was blowing a perfect hurricane by this time, and they were drifting rapidly into the current.

They managed it at last, however, and were soon rowing towards the house as steadily as the floating trees and brushwood would permit.

Meanwhile Fenwicke had conveyed the terrified little band of women, including Mrs. Potts (who had packed all her most cherished

belongings in an enormous blue and white handkerchief, and was stoically awaiting what she called "the end") to a room at the west side of the house, from whose windows they could watch the progress of Conrath and Sir Cyril through the muddy, ever-deepening water. Mrs. Chandleur was sobbing loudly, Mrs. Potts was repeating long verses of Scripture, while the two girls, with pale and anxious faces, were holding each other's hands in silence. Fenwicke was alternately making the most cheerful remarks he could think of, and mentally calculating how long the old house would hold out—for the water was flowing all round it now, and rising higher every moment. The rain was still pouring down steadily; the wind, if anything, had increased in violence.

Fenwicke swore a little under his breath as he saw the boathouse turn over.

"They'll never reach it!" he muttered between his teeth. "The wind's dead against them."

It was at this moment that the far-away

wing of the house fell with a thundering crash. The rest of the building seemed to tremble and sway ominously with the shock. Mrs. Chandleur and Mrs. Potts shrieked in concert. Even Fenwicke turned somewhat pale; and Fay burst into hysterical tears. Bee remained perfectly still and silent, though her lips were quivering, and her heart was beating fast.

The water was now within a few feet of the window.

Breathlessly they watched the two dimly-seen figures—the smashing of the boat-house—the slow progress of the boat towards the house. It came nearer—nearer. It was close to them. It was under the window.

"For God's sake be quick," said Douglas in a hoarse undertone to Max, as the latter helped Mrs. Chandleur into the boat.

The other nodded. He understood.

Fay came next; then Bee; then Mrs. Potts, firmly grasping her bundle, which Fenwicke, who followed her, seized and unceremoniously pitched into the water.

"Sit still!" exclaimed Douglas sternly, as she made a wild grab after her disappearing treasures—"or I'll send you after it."

Then he and Cyril bent to their oars and rowed with strokes swift and strong—rowed for their lives, and the lives of these others—away from the doomed house. And not too soon. Hardly had they got into the current of the river than they saw the whole building shiver and rock—then suddenly upheave itself as if impelled by some unseen force from below. The next moment, with a long grinding crash, it crumbled and fell into the seething waters, which by this time stretched far beyond it in their path of destruction.

"Thank God we were in time!" muttered Cyril.

He was looking somewhat pale, and Bee noticed that he was rowing with one hand only.

"Have you hurt your hand, Cyril?" she said anxiously.

"No—nothing much," he said, smiling across at her somewhat languidly.

"Give me your oar, Northburgh," said Fenwicke hastily. "You look done up—and the boat's fearfully overweighted."

"No—sit still," was the curt answer. "I can manage."

It was quite light now, and bitterly cold. The early morning shone on a dreary scene enough. The hurrying, whirling, discoloured river, spreading — spreading — and creeping stealthily up the sides of the rain-blurred hills; the sullen, lowering clouds; the huddled groups of distressed and lowing cattle, chased by the flood from one place of refuge to another; there was an infinite desolation about it all.

They were out of the current now, and approaching the hill which faced Poldornalupe on the other side of the river. Far up the hillside was perched a shepherd's cottage. This they made their goal.

As the boat touched the turf, Fenwicke sprang out, and helped out the women. Then, with infinite labour, he and Conrath dragged the boat several yards higher up the

slope, and secured her to a stout old ash tree. The rain had suddenly ceased, and the wind had somewhat abated. The chances were that the water would not rise appreciably higher.

The shepherd and his wife received their shivering visitors with effusion, and placed at their disposal the best their poor cottage afforded. Hot tea comforted the feminine portion of the company, and hot whisky and water the masculine.

"I'm afraid you will get your death of cold, my darling," said Sir Cyril, approaching Bee as she stood steaming at the fire.

"Cyril — how frightfully pale you look! Are you ill?" she said quickly.

"Not in the least. I have hurt my wrist somehow, though, and it is rather painful. Part of the boat-house struck it in some way, and I fancy it is sprained or something. It is a mere trifle, you silly child," he added. "Have a little sip of my whisky and water —it will do you good. You look like a small ghost."

Here Fenwicke rose suddenly.

"I am going to take the boat and row across to Catterick's farm," he said. "It must be flooded, for it is on the same level as Poldornalupe. And there are a lot of little children."

"I'll go with you," said Conrath, rising also. "No, Sir Cyril, you had better not come. Your wrist is paining you a good deal, I can see—and it's a long pull up and across the river. Besides, we had better leave as much room in the boat as possible. I suppose there's no fear of the mine, Fenwicke?" he added quickly.

"Oh no, it's all right. There's not the slightest chance of the water getting up there."

From the doorway Fay watched them run down the hill, get into the boat, and push off. She stood there for a long time.

Bee occupied herself in binding up Sir Cyril's wrist, which was evidently paining him greatly. But her thoughts were far away from him, poor fellow, if he had only known it.

The morning, the noon, the afternoon passed, and night fell. The river was no longer rising, nor did it rain any more; but the wind was both cold and strong. There was no moon, only the starlight shed a pale sickly shimmer on the dark tossing waters.

And still Conrath and Fenwicke had not come back.

"I misdoubt me something may have happened to the gentlemen," said the old shepherd, looking from the door anxiously. "There's a heap of heavy rubbish being brought down by the flood. Mayhap the boat is swamped."

Both Bee and Fay turned deadly pale.

"They'll be here shortly," said Cyril reassuringly to Fay. "They have hardly had time to get there and back, you know." Which of course was a palpable untruth, and did not deceive the poor girls in the least.

A few minutes later they had both gone out into the starlight, each torn with a terrible dread — the same dread. They

watched the river for what seemed to them a long weary time.

At last Fay grasped Bee's hand convulsively.

"Look"—she said almost in a whisper—"is not that the boat coming back?"

As she spoke a tiny dark speck appeared in the distance, coming rapidly nearer and nearer.

"Yes"—Bee answered with dry lips. "Yes, it is. Oh, thank Heaven!"

They watched in anxious silence. Five minutes passed. They could see the boat distinctly now.

"Bee!"—exclaimed Fay in a tone of sharp agony. "Look! Don't you see? Only one of them has come back!"

"I know," came the answer, in a voice that Bee hardly recognized as her own.

A few minutes crawled by; and then Max Fenwicke rowed close to their feet.

Another figure lay at the bottom of the boat—the face still, and white, and rigid. Fenwicke, scarcely less pale, fastened the

boat to the tree in silence, and with clumsy fingers that shook visibly.

"Is he dead?" asked Bee harshly.

"I don't know," was the husky answer.

Cyril Northburgh and the old shepherd came hurrying down the slope. As one in a terrible unreal dream, Bee watched their troubled faces — saw Douglas lifted tenderly out of the boat and carried up to the cottage — heard Fay's half-stifled sobs and cries.

Well! — Fay had a right to show her anxiety. But she — Bee? What right had she — except the right of their childish companionship? Ah! what keen bewildered pain was this that shot through her heart — grasping it like an icy hand! Why did such a sick fear hold her? Why did she almost hate the weeping girl who knelt at Douglas's side, in an agony of love and terror? Her heart answered soon enough. She realized for the first time the awful desolation that would fill her life if Douglas were taken out of it. And she realized — *why!* She knew that she loved him — loved him even as Fay

loved him — with all the strength of her woman's nature.

Looking up suddenly, she intercepted a swift significant glance between Sir Cyril and the old shepherd. The latter shook his head. He had his hand on Douglas's heart——

With a low, incoherent cry, Bee rushed out into the starlit night, and flung herself down on the dripping grass.

"Oh, I can't bear it!—I can't bear it!" she moaned tearlessly. "Oh God! let him not be dead! — let him not be dead!"

The throbbing stars, with their myriad pitying eyes, looked down unwinkingly on this one sobbing little woman, as they were doubtless looking down on thousands of other sobbing little women, all over the world. It was nothing new to them.

Bee never knew how long she crouched there. It seemed to her hours afterwards when she heard Sir Cyril's voice calling her.

"Are you there, Bee?" he said, his clear tones ringing out on the silent night.

The girl rose.

"I am here, Cyril," she said faintly.

He came up to her and drew her hand within his arm.

"How you are trembling," he said tenderly. "Why are you out here in the damp and cold? You will be glad to hear poor Conrath has recovered consciousness. He will be all right, I hope, in a couple of hours. Fenwicke says they found the farm deserted and under water. They succeeded in saving some of the cattle; but just as they were pushing off again, a heavy beam fell upon Conrath and stunned him. He is a good deal bruised, but not seriously injured. By Jove! we thought it was all up with him half an hour ago, I can tell you. Poor Fenwicke was crying like a child."

Bee did not answer.

Of course if she had been a properly constituted young woman (for fictional purposes) she would have fainted away. The "intense relief would have been too much for her," etc. etc. But healthy young women do not as a rule faint away from excess of joy, or

relief, or even fear. At least such has not been my experience of young women hitherto. And Bee was blessed with excellent health, both of mind and body.

So she walked silently back to the cottage by the side of the man who was to be her husband — who was to have and to hold her till death should part them. And she spoke gentle tender words to that other man who was to be Fay's husband — little dreaming that his pain of heart was far greater and bitterer than her own.

CHAPTER VII.

"FOR RICHER — FOR POORER."

"The will-o'-the-wisp of literary fame, which so many pursue all their lives in vain, fortunate if it comes at last to flicker for a while over their graves!"

—ANSTEY.

"The men that marry women—
And why they marry them—will always be
A marvel and a mystery to the world!"

* * * *

"Nor even the tenderest heart, and next our own
Knows half the reasons why we smile and sigh!"

—KEBLE.

A MONTH had passed since that weird day and night at Poldornalupe, and all our *dramatis personæ* were once more in London, none the worse for their experiences — with the exception of a few severe colds. May sunshine was smiling everywhere, and the season was in full swing.

Bee attended the usual number of balls and dinners and garden parties, and all the other entertainments which too often make "the grasshopper a burden" in the early English summer. People said Miss Adeane had "gone off" somewhat in her looks. Certainly she was not so pretty as she had been.

Conrath's three-volume novel had just been published, and the critics had kindly admitted that it "did not in any way detract from the reputation of the author of 'Yesterday!'" Some, indeed, had gone further, and pronounced his reputation enhanced thereby. He had a good deal of work on hand just now, and did not scruple to make what his publishers termed "pretty stiff terms" for all he wrote. But I am bound to say he turned out first-class work. He had not been long enough a favourite with the confiding British public to offer it stones in place of bread.

Fortune's caresses, like her buffets, seldom come singly; and it was just at this time that the workings at Poldornalupe once more struck the lost lode, which proved — if not as

rich as Fenwicke's dreams — still rich enough to promise a very handsome yearly return for all concerned.

If Conrath had been popular before, he was doubly so now; and, following the advice of his friends and his publishers alike, he dropped his pseudonym of "Michael Armstrong," and wrote under his own name.

Among his letters one morning was one stamped with a blood-red crest. Both crest and handwriting seemed to touch some strangely familiar chord in his memory. The letter was dated from a little post-town in Wales, and proved to be from his father's brother Evan Conrath. It was a nice letter, congratulating his nephew upon his success in the literary world, apologizing frankly for the harshness and neglect of the past years, and finally asking his young kinsman to let bygones be bygones, and pay him a long visit at Berstwith Manor.

Douglas wrote back a civil note enough (he was older now, you see, and more tolerant than in his boyish revengeful dreams) —

signifying his willingness to let bygones be bygones, but regretting that his engagements would not permit him to visit Wales in the meantime.

It was fixed that his marriage with Fay should take place at the end of June. Lady Dinwoodie, as a matter of fact, had intimated to him pretty plainly, though without actually putting it into so many words, that she did not approve of long engagements, and that as his position was now so materially improved, she saw no reason for any further delay. And, strange though it may seem, Douglas experienced a certain sense of relief in the thought of his marriage. It seemed to him that it would be easier to sustain the *rôle* of the quietly affectionate husband than that of the devoted lover. And he had a vague idea that in his new ties he might be able to stifle his love for Bee. It was he himself who had suggested June for the ceremony. Lady Dinwoodie had spoken of September, but he had quietly over-ruled her, and held to his point, as the most ardent

lover might have done. So June it was to be.

Fay was pleased by his apparent impatience. It lulled to rest a certain uneasy undefined conviction that had of late awakened in her heart, that her lover was not altogether as other lovers. He was scrupulously attentive to her slightest wish, to be sure, and now that his means were augmented he loaded her with handsome presents. In public his conduct was all that could be desired. But when they were alone, his manner, though infinitely gentle, and at times almost tender, was certainly never lover-like. His kiss of greeting or parting was the merest touch of his lips on her cheek or forehead. He never took her in his arms, never told her that he loved her, never indulged in any of the fond extravagances of speech to which lovers as a class are prone.

But his slightest caress was precious to her —foolish little woman that she was. She loyally told herself that she would not have him different, this coldly-gentle lover of hers;

that his quiet, seldom-expressed affection was dearer to her than any wild protestations of devotion could have been. And yet—and yet—if he would only take her in his arms sometimes, only *tell* her that he loved her, only look at her with a deeper expression in his dark eyes than the calm friendly look she knew so well!

She sighed to-night, as she sat in her mother's sombre drawing-room, awaiting his coming.

"He has other things to think of," she whispered to the weird summer twilight. "And besides—he does not love me as I love him. How could he? I think I almost worship him. But ah!"—she murmured passionately—"even if he had no love for me at all, I should still think it the height of earthly happiness to be his wife. His wife! Douglas's wife!" she repeated softly. "It seems too much happiness!"

And then—her eyes filled with wistful tears.

The voice of Douglas himself made her start.

"All in the dark, Fay?" he said, bending down to kiss her. "Why, my dear—you have been crying! What is the matter?"

Her lips trembled, but she did not speak for a second or two. Then she said in a quivering voice:

"Douglas—shall I make you happy, do you think?—when we—when we are married? I—I am not pretty—nor clever. And I know I have a sharp tongue, and a bad temper. I have none of the qualities your wife ought to have—except—except, oh, my dear! that I do *love* you so!" And she crept into his arms, sobbing passionately.

Douglas was inexpressibly touched. What man would not have been?

"My dear"—he said unsteadily—"you are a great deal too good for me, if you only knew it. If you do not make me happy, it will be my fault—not yours."

"And—and—you *do* love me, Douglas?" Her voice was low and tremulous, and almost inaudible.

A curious impulse of tenderness towards

her came over him. Without speaking, he turned her face to his, and for the first time kissed her lips.

And at that moment Lady Dinwoodie entered the room.

* * * * *

So the days passed; and it was the night before Fay's wedding-day. She and Bee were sitting before the fire in her bedroom; for the evenings had been chilly of late, though it was mid-June. It was a whim of the bride-elect's that Bee (who, of course, was to be one of her bridesmaids) should sleep at Bryanstone Square to-night.

Fay looked singularly weird and elf-like as she sat leaning her elbow on her knee and her chin on her hand, staring into the glowing heart of the fire. Her fluffy flaxen hair was unfastened and streaming over her shoulders, in almost startling contrast to her dark eyes and eyebrows.

Bee was sitting on the hearthrug, slowly plaiting her shining locks into a long thick pig-tail. She was a little paler and thinner

than when we saw her last; and her eyes were no longer a child's eyes, but a woman's.

"I wish you and Cyril had arranged to be married to-morrow, too," said Fay suddenly.

Bee laughed somewhat mirthlessly.

"So Cyril has just been telling me," she said, her soft lips setting themselves in a straight unlovely line.

Fay looked at her curiously for a second or two.

"Poor Cyril," she said then, half under her breath.

"Why poor Cyril?" Bee made answer sharply.

"Don't you know?" was the quiet rejoinder. Then she added, "Sometimes I think—that you will never marry him at all, Bee."

"Then I wish to Heaven," broke out the other with sudden fierce vehemence, "that you could get him to think so too!"

Fay smiled—a strange, quiet smile.

"Do you know my cousin Cyril so little as that?" she said, raising her eyebrows slightly.

"Don't you know how tenacious men of his temperament are of any once harboured idea? If you had refused him at first he would have felt it a good deal, I daresay—for his feelings are deeper than you might think—but he would have got over it in time (or looked as if he had), and he would never have spoken of it again. But now—when he has looked upon you as his future wife, when he has kissed you as his future wife, when he has allowed himself to think of you as men like him do think of the women who promise to marry them—he will not let you go, Bee. His will is as hard as iron, though it is so gentle and caressing. He can be cruel—can Cyril. You cannot influence him nor change his purpose because of his love for you, as—as for instance, I might — influence — my Douglas."

Her voice dropped and shivered in pronouncing that name, as with the wave of a swiftly-nearing happiness.

Bee was drearily silent. Her heart echoed Fay's words, and acknowledged that they

were true. She remembered the gentle inflexibility of her lover's refusal to give her up —"not while her heart was empty." And—she could not tell him. Ah no—no!

She loved Fay sincerely. In all these years their friendship had never been broken. But would she have been human, think you, if—in the light of her awakened heart—she had not felt a certain sick passion of jealousy towards her girl friend, on this, the eve of Douglas's wedding day?

God only knew how terrible had been her struggles with her heart during these past long dreary weeks. Poor little soul! She could not understand it—she could not fathom it—this strange new pain that ate her heart by day and night. She felt ill. She looked ill. And, as I have hinted, people were beginning to notice that she did. I don't know if Fay had noticed it. If she had not, perhaps it was hardly to be wondered at. There is a species of self-absorption, you know, tacitly allowed to brides-elect—though it is denied, I know not why, to their bride-

grooms. As the time of her marriage came nearer—nearer—Fay had lost her fears and misgivings, and yielded herself unresistingly to a mental whirl of half-incredulous joy; a joy that shone in her eyes and thrilled in her voice, and at times made her look almost pretty. And Bee—silently fighting down her newly-born love—envied her with all the strength of her fresh, untried, undisciplined nature. Nevertheless, she had a curious child-like belief that after to-morrow her love would surely fade back again to that old tender sister love from which it had its birth. When Douglas was married, the poor thing argued, surely she could not be so sinful as to love him with this strange new passion of her womanhood?

Presently Fay spoke again.

"I wish we were going to be away for a longer time," she said thoughtfully. "I think Douglas ought to give up writing for a month or two. He works too hard, I think. Sometimes he has quite a jaded, nervous, almost haggard look. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, Bee, you do know. You have often said so. For my part, I don't see why he should write any more in the meantime. He has made a name; and between his books and those mines he has made a comparative fortune—so why not rest on his oars, so to speak?"

Bee mechanically took up the poker, and stirred the bits of glowing coal between the bars until they fell tinkling upon the hearth. Then she said somewhat irrelevantly:

"Cyril says that if you want to make a name in literature you must either publish one very clever book or a great many stupid ones."

"I don't see the inference," said Fay, flushing a little.

"Ah!" was the dry answer. "Well, don't let Douglas see the inference either. A man—even a clever man—is so very much what his wife makes him, you know. And excess of worldly bliss is apt to dull the imagination—just a little. I fancy genius is a plant that

flourishes best in uncongenial soil, and under gloomy skies. You're too fond of Douglas, Fay," she added in a hard, high voice. "At least, you let him see too much that you are fond of him. You'll spoil him—before a year has passed. There's nothing so easy to spoil as men."

Then, without the slightest warning, the speaker burst into a storm of hysterical tears.

"I hope you will both be happy," she sobbed. "Oh, I do hope you will both be very, *very* happy."

Fay cried a little too. But through her tears she smiled dreamily.

"Happy!" she murmured. "Ah yes, we shall be happy."

* * * * *

I need not describe the wedding. If you take up one of those journals so dear to our womankind, you will probably find full details of perhaps a dozen similar ceremonies. Everything went off well—even the weather was all that could be desired. Max Fenwicke was "best man," and looked as radiant as

though he himself had been the bridegroom. Indeed, he looked several degrees more radiant than the bridegroom did, for the latter was wretchedly pale, and evidently extremely nervous.

Fay, perhaps, had never looked better in her life than she did on this, her wedding morning. There could be no possible doubt of her happiness. She seemed to move, and speak, and think in a curious waking dream —until she found herself alone with her husband in the railway carriage.

His first observation was perhaps, for a bridegroom, unique.

"Thank God—it is over!" he exclaimed, as he leaned his head back on the dusty blue cushions, and passed his hand wearily across his forehead.

He spoke irritably, and there was an unmistakable frown on his face.

Fay made no reply. She was "glad it was over" too. She longed to creep close to him, and tell him how happy she was, how she loved him, how good a wife she meant to be

to him. But something intangible in his look and attitude restrained her.

Presently he asked her if she would like the window down, and on her replying in the negative, busied himself in cutting for her perusal the pages of several of the weekly periodicals, of which he had laid in a pretty fair supply. Then, having ascertained that she was quite comfortable, that she would rather not change places with him, that she felt no draught, etc., he leaned back in his place with folded arms and closed eyes, and to all intents and purposes appeared to be going to sleep.

But his wife did not read the papers he had cut for her. She sat looking out of the window, her mouth somewhat drooping, her eyes just a little misty. The old vague unsatisfied pain was creeping round her heart. Was it any wonder? She was not dreaming now.

As for Douglas, I can really find no adequate excuse for him. He was conscious of behaving badly. It is not matrimonial etiquette, I fancy, to leave your newly-made bride to

her own meditations, in what ought to be a blissful solitude *à deux*, while you shamelessly snatch forty winks, or appear to do so—which is just as bad—under her very eyes. And this was what our friend Douglas was doing. He was desperately tired, to be sure, for he had been working early and late for the last few weeks to get all his literary engagements fulfilled sufficiently to allow him to take this fortnight's holiday. Also he had been up all night, and was in what Bee used to call one of his "moods." But though these might be reasons, they could hardly be termed excuses. And if I say he was not asleep, but very far from it (as was really the case), I'm afraid it only aggravates matters. As a matter of fact, he was feeling utterly worn out in mind and body. For a long time he had been greatly over-taxing his strength, and neglecting himself in many ways. And his mental emotions of late had been strong and exciting. He looked forward to this brief wedding-journey of his as a kind of oasis in life's battle.

Perhaps it is needless to say he had no intention of playing the part of the utterly devoted husband. He meant to do his duty by his young wife; he meant to be tender and affectionate, and scrupulously careful of her wishes and comfort. With the curious short-sightedness of masculine vision, he trusted she would never divine the absence of that love without which all tenderness and affection and care are to our foolish, innocently-adoring women as less than nothing. And, as this mental attitude of his was necessarily totally unsuspected by the poor little woman whom he had just taken "for better, for worse," it is natural to predict that waves and billows of disenchantment threatened her matrimonial sea.

I am tempted at this point to make a slight digression and a few painfully trite remarks as to our habitually unfair treatment of the weaker sex. Even in our grandest passions, when the first glamour is over, we expect so much, and give so little. Our hearts may hold so many idols, of one kind and another.

The heart of the woman we love must hold but one. And yet—they have their revenge on a few of us, after all. The dear, tender, wily Delilahs! The few avenge the many. Here, too, the law of compensation swings its marvellously even balance. Here, too, our arrows (shot heedlessly into the air) have a way of finding their billets in the hearts of our better selves—and rankling there in a particularly unpleasant way.

To return to our bride and bridegroom. They were nearing one of the large junctions now. And as the train slackened speed somewhat, Douglas opened his eyes and sat up. Perhaps something in his wife's face and attitude — something undefined, desolate, infinitely sad—touched him. Perhaps the utter restfulness and quiet of the last hour had soothed alike his nerves and his temper. I cannot tell you. I think, however, that he had the grace to feel a little bit ashamed of himself. Indeed he said as much; and Fay accepted his apologies with a few brief words and a smile that was not very far from tears.

As the train left the station again, he changed his seat for the one next Fay's. Then, without speaking, he put his arm round her, drew her gently towards him, and kissed her.

And though the caress was utterly without passion, and even held but little tenderness, it satisfied her, poor child, and her heart beat like an imprisoned bird.

He held her closer ; and his voice trembled as he whispered :

"God helping me, I will be a good husband to you, Fay. Only be patient with me, my dear, and forgive me when I disappoint you, or hurt your dear, loving little heart. Will you, Fay?"

Ah! what would she not have forgiven him? For answer she nestled close to his heart, and clasped his fingers almost convulsively in hers. A keen compassion for this loving trusting woman, whom he was so ruthlessly deceiving, surged up in Douglas's soul.

"My little wife," he murmured, remorse stabbing at his heart-strings.

But Fay only heard his murmured love-words, and thanked God silently for the good that had come to her.

On, on swept the train through the still June afternoon.

"Whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."

CHAPTER VIII.

CHIEFLY CONCERNING SIR CYRIL.

"If it be that a man and a woman
Are made for no mutual grief,
That each gives the pain to some other,
And neither can give the relief—

"If miss, the charm of the world,
Is tied round the holy feet—
I scorn to shrink from facing
What my brothers and sisters meet.

"But I cry when the wolf is tearing
At the core of my heart, as now,
When I was the man to be tortured,
Why should the woman be *thou?*"

* * * *

I DON'T know whether it may be considered strange, but it is undoubtedly true, that good women almost invariably rush into self-sacrificing and somewhat indiscriminating charitable research as an antidote against heart troubles. Women less good, have of

course less self-sacrificing ways of revenging themselves upon an adverse fate.

Bee, at this time, was seized with a sudden fancy for investigating the slums of Whitechapel, Stratford, and other equally savoury districts—for visiting filthy, drunken men and women — for teaching and managing the morals of imp-like, ragged, and preternaturally knowing and nasty little children.

She did not visit these haunts alone, of course. She had struck up a friendship with an energetic young woman about her own age, who had also come to the conclusi , apparently, that all worldly pleasures were as dross, and that life, in general, was rather a poor affair. The Honourable Mary Lanceworth, indeed, having been forbidden by her very sensible father to marry the consumptive and impecunious curate on whom she had set her young affections, was at present disposed to view existence through somewhat azure-hued glasses. She was as open about her disappointment as Bee was reticent. Perhaps she guessed the latter's trouble. I do not know.

Sir Cyril was aghast at this new departure on the part of his *fiancée*. This rage for haunting what he called (with some justice) "dens of unmitigated filth and iniquity," was a thing he specially abhorred.

And what effect his opinion was likely to have upon the somewhat self-willed Miss Adeane, I leave my readers to imagine.

Upon one or two occasions he quietly insisted upon accompanying her, and his silent but disgusted air of protest throughout the whole proceedings made Bee more perversely determined in her line of conduct than ever.

The engaged pair had rather a stiff quarrel on the subject, the result of which was that Cyril made a point of being the young ladies' escort whenever their fancy led them eastwards, which just then was pretty often.

Well—there was a good deal of fever about at that time: and one day Cyril complained of feeling "seedy" (a very unusual admission from him), and as the days went on felt seedier still. And at last came a day when he got home with a blinding headache, and a

deathly sickness and faintness upon him. It ended, in point of fact, in his having the fever very badly, and being as near death's door as he could be without going in.

Of course Bee was very grieved and sorry. People are always very grieved and sorry, when their wilfulness has brought about some catastrophe which in the circumstances has been almost a foregone conclusion. Their grief and sorrow, however, generally come a little late.

About this time, too, Miss Adeane's zeal flagged somewhat. Little by little she gave up her slums and her Whitechapel *protegées.* The Honourable Mary had suddenly shelved the memory of her curate, and married a wealthy brewer. Bee did not care to make her charitable pilgrimages alone. Above all, the objects of her solicitude had not proved themselves particularly grateful; and altogether, not much good seemed to have been done. The girl felt discouraged, and life once more seemed flat and unprofitable. She missed Cyril, too, and was unhappy and self-

reproachful because of her indirect share in his illness, which was a tedious and prolonged one. The first time she was allowed to see him after he had "turned the corner," was one bright day in early autumn. He was sitting up in bed leaning against a forest of pillows, and as Bee entered the room with Lady Northburgh, she was so shocked to see how thin and changed he was.

"My poor Cyril," she whispered, trying to conquer an unruly lump that would come in her throat, "I am afraid you have been very ill."

"I'm afraid I have," he said, just in his old tender languid voice—except that it was so weak Bee had to stoop low to hear it. "But I'm getting on all right now—though I am such a scarecrow; so don't look so shocked. Sit down, dear, and tell me all you have been doing. How are the *protegées* at Whitechapel?"

"Oh, Cyril—I don't know. I—I haven't been there for ever so long."

A queer little ghost of a smile flitted over his pale face.

"No? How is that?" he said slowly.

She flushed slightly; then said in a low voice:

"Well you know, Cyril, I found out—I came to see that it was not really for these people's good I was going there—not really. It was—it was to please myself. It was because—because I was tired of everything I had done, and everything I knew about. And I wanted something new—I wanted a change."

"Dear honest little woman," he murmured, pressing feebly the hand he held.

"And then," she went on—"when you were so ill—and I felt it was all my fault—oh Cyril, I was so grieved, and so unhappy. I couldn't get it out of my mind how good and patient you were that very last day you were out—and you looked so pale and tired, though you never said anything. And I kept dragging you about from place to place—like the selfish little wretch I am," she concluded remorsefully.

A quizzical light came into Cyril's tired

blue eyes for a second, but he did not speak.

"And then they were all so ungrateful," Bee went on dejectedly. "You would not believe how ungrateful! That old Mrs. Ward was quite rude to me because I would not give her half-a-crown a week for—for *gin!* Don't laugh, Cyril. You don't *know* how disappointed I am—and how disgusted with —with everything."

"Poor child," said her lover gently. "When you are as old as I am, my dear, you will find that most people are ungrateful, and you will take it as a matter of course. It isn't worth worrying about, is it?"

"Ah, but you are so different, Cyril. You never do worry about anything."

"No—not much," he assented languidly.

And just then his mother, seeing that he looked white and tired, carried Bee off downstairs; for the doctors had, in the meantime, forbidden their patient either exertion or excitement. And the mere fact of seeing and talking toBee had transgressed both these rules.

That same afternoon Bee went to see Fay Conrath. Douglas had taken a pretty house in old Kensington—an old-fashioned house, with an equally old-fashioned garden behind.

Fay would rather have had a "bijou residence" in Mayfair, or thereabouts; but in this, as in a good many other matters, she found that her husband had somewhat decided views. He did not want to sacrifice comfort to fashion; and he had taken a curious fancy to this old rambling house, with its low-ceiled rooms, its old-world windows, and its quiet fragrant garden. It was difficult to believe that busy restless London was round about it, and that a few moments would take one into the roar of the unquiet thoroughfare.

One of Fay's greatest grievances was that all the principal rooms were panelled in old oak.

"It is so sombre," she was saying to Bee on this fast-waning autumn afternoon. "I wanted Douglas to have them painted over in pale maize or cream colour — but he said it would be Vandalism."

"I should think so," murmured Bee under her breath.

"However—this room consoles me wonderfully," the young wife went on, gazing languidly round the exquisitely furnished nest in which they were sitting. It was her own particular sitting-room, and Douglas had had it fitted up and furnished with great care, and without the slightest regard to expense.

Fay herself was looking somewhat thin and pale. The heat had tried her a little, she said. It always did. She was very becomingly dressed, though, and looked in some indefinable way more attractive than before her marriage.

"And Douglas? He is well, I hope?" said Bee, after they had discussed Cyril and his illness, and Mary Lanceworth's marriage, and many other subjects of interest.

"Oh yes, he is quite well. I suppose he is in the study," Fay answered in a voice that was strange to Bee. "He nearly always is there. I don't see very much of him, except at meal times—and not always then."

"What is he writing now?" asked Bee, after a minute.

"I can't tell you. He never talks to me about his work. Have some more tea, Bee?"

And at that moment the door opened, and Douglas himself came in. He looked tired, Bee thought; and there was some constraint in his manner as he addressed his wife.

As a matter of fact they had that morning had their first quarrel. It had begun about a mere nothing, of course, as most first quarrels do; and I am bound to say that Fay was entirely to blame in the matter. Indeed, as far as Douglas was concerned, I hardly know if it could be called a quarrel at all; for he had taken but little part in it, except that he had perhaps aggravated matters by rising and walking out of the room while it was at its height. They had not spoken to each other since, except at luncheon, during the whole of which meal Fay had sulked persistently.

Bee divined at once that something was

"out of gear," and soon took her departure. Douglas went down to the carriage with her, then came slowly upstairs again and into his wife's room.

She was standing at the window, gazing out listlessly at the fast-darkening garden. She was not looking sulky now—only sad.

Douglas came and leaned against the window-frame for a few minutes in silence. His face had a pale, worried look, and his eyes were half-troubled, half-weary. Suddenly he put out his hand, and took hers. She did not turn her head.

"Oh, my wife—let us have peace," he said with a strange break in his voice.

And as he spoke he drew her gently but determinedly towards him.

In another moment she was lying on his breast, crying as though her heart would break.

"Ah—I have been so miserable all day, Douglas," she sobbed. "Forgive me, dear—do forgive me."

"Yes, yes," he said soothingly. "Don't

cry, there's a good girl. You will bring on one of your bad headaches." Then he added wearily, "Don't let us have these scenes, Fay. They do no good, and only make us both unhappy."

"Have you been unhappy too?" she whispered.

"Yes," he made answer in an odd voice.

"But we will forget about it, Douglas?"

"Oh yes—we will forget about it."

* * * * *

Cyril was able to be downstairs every afternoon now, though he was gaining strength but slowly. The doctors had decreed that he was to winter in the south of France. He and Lady Northburgh were to start as soon as he was a little stronger.

He was lying on the sofa in the library one October afternoon—for he was only able to sit up for a comparatively small portion of each day. He had been lying thus for some time, staring thoughtfully at the blazing fire in the dreamy, half-conscious content of convalescence, wondering if he could persuade

Bee to marry him before he left England. He thought he could. He had been very patient. And he had been very ill. Surely her tender little heart could not say him nay.

And as if in answer to his thoughts, the door opened, and Bee herself came in. Lady Northburgh came immediately behind her.

"I have persuaded your mother to take a short drive, as the afternoon is so fine," said Bee as she surrendered her hand to Cyril's tender clasp. "She is looking pale and worn out. I will stay beside you until she comes back again."

"That's right," replied Cyril with a contented sigh. "I have been vainly trying to persuade her to go out for days. I believe she is afraid I shall get off this sofa, and go down to the club or somewhere, in her absence."

"My dear boy—I wish you could," said his mother with a fond smile. Then she added anxiously, "You are sure you will not want anything while I am gone?"

"Quite the contrary, *madre mia*. And if I do, I daresay Bee will take pity on me."

When Lady Northburgh had gone, Bee took off her hat and jacket, stirred the fire, and sat down in a low chair near Cyril's sofa.

"Should you like me to read to you?" she said presently.

"Certainly not," was the prompt and ungrateful answer. "Bee—are you not going to kiss me?"

She coloured faintly, and stooping, kissed his cheek.

"Shy, cold little thing," he whispered fondly and reproachfully.

There was a brief silence; then Cyril said:

"You know that these doctors have ordered me to winter out of England?"

"Yes—your mother told me."

"Well, my darling," he went on very tenderly—"don't you think I might take my wife with me?"

A curious look of terror flashed into the girl's eyes.

"Cyril—I—I don't quite understand," she made answer inarticulately.

"I think you do, dear"—drawing her down to him by the trembling little hand he held. "I want you to marry me—and let us go away together. I have tried very hard to be patient, Bee, and I have waited a long time. Come to me now, dear. I want you."

Bee rose suddenly, pulling away her hand almost violently. She had grown deadly white—even to her lips.

"Ah no—no, Cyril," she cried almost imploringly. "I can't! I *can't!*" And as she spoke she locked her hands together like one in cruel pain.

For a few minutes silence reigned in the quiet library. The girl had flung herself into a chair. She was trembling from head to foot.

"Bee—come here," said Cyril in a strangely quiet voice.

She rose at once, and in a passion of impotent remorse knelt down beside him, sobbing bitterly. He put his arm round her, and stroked her bent head gently.

"My poor little girl," he said almost in a whisper—"what is the matter? Is the thought of coming to me so terrible to you? Can't you trust me, dear? Don't you know that I love you so well that your happiness is dearer to me than anything else in the world? My child—don't sob so."

"Oh Cyril—Cyril"—sobbed the poor thing—"you are so good—and so kind. And I—I am so wicked and so ungrateful. Oh, if you only knew—if you only knew!"

The arm that held her trembled a little.

"And if I do know, my dear one—if I have guessed," he said, with an infinity of love and pain struggling for the mastery in his usually tranquil voice.

She raised her head with a half-smothered cry.

"Cyril—you do not!—you cannot!" she exclaimed, a sharp ring of fear catching her breath.

"Little girl," he made answer sadly, "I have been very blind for a long time. But—I think my eyes are opened now. Listen to

me, Bee. Do you remember what I told you once? That I should never let you go while your heart was empty?—until you told me that you loved some one else as—as I would have had you love me? Has that day come, Bee? Ah, do you think I do not know?—poor trembling little heart?"

Her heavy sobs were her only answer.

"Dear"—went on Cyril, after a minute or two, and his voice was very low and faint—"I give you back — your promise — your freedom. Do you understand?"

"Ah, Cyril, Cyril"—she murmured brokenly—"what must you think of me?"

"I think, my poor Bee, that it is well that you have come to know your heart—before it was—too late."

"And, Cyril—you—you will not be—very unhappy?" she said, looking up at him wistfully.

"I think you must not—ask me that—just yet," he answered with an odd catch in his voice.

He was looking terribly white and ex-

hausted, and after a minute he said faintly:

"Leave me for a little while, my darling. I—I had rather be alone."

"And—and you forgive me, Cyril?"

"Yes, my little lost love—I forgive you. It was not—your fault."

"I—I don't like to leave you," she faltered. "Let me get you some wine or something."

He made an almost fiercely impatient negative gesture. He did not speak, for his voice was already beyond his control; and it was intolerable to him that she should see how weak he was.

After a moment's hesitation Bee rose and went into the adjoining room, closing the door gently behind her.

Cyril lay for some time without moving, his teeth pressed hard on his under-lip, his hands clenched as if in fierce vain effort to crush down the sick gnawing pain that seemed creeping upwards from his heart.

It was a hard sacrifice he had made. His love for Bee was deep and true and passion-

ate, as the love of these seemingly calm and passionless natures is apt to be. Now that the absolute necessity for stern restraint was past, his self-control deserted him suddenly and utterly. He felt inexpressibly heart-sick and desolate; and after a brief struggle with the deadly physical weakness that was fast mastering him, he buried his face in his arm, and gave way to a fit of tearless exhausted sobbing.

* * * * *

Bee could not sleep that night. Cyril's pale face, with its heart-broken smile, haunted her like some reproachful ghost. What had she done? Had she thrown away the substance for the shadow? She knew Cyril would have been a good kind husband to her. And—might not her duty lie in making him happy? Ah, but life was hard and puzzling and dreary. There seemed to be no comfort anywhere.

She heard, the next day, that he was worse. He had had a bad night, and a slight return of fever.

When he was able to be downstairs again, he received a tiny note.

"Are you better? Can you see me? I have so much to say to you.

"BEE."

In answer to which he returned a feebly-scrawled line in pencil.

"Yes, dear. Come.

"CYRIL."

Lady Northburgh was in the room when Bee entered, but shortly afterwards she went out, leaving them alone together.

Cyril was looking very ill. He was ghastly pale, his eyes were heavy and sunken, and he seemed to speak with a painful effort.

"Dear Cyril"—began Bee, hurriedly and nervously, as the door closed—"I want you to—to forget all about my—I mean I am quite willing—quite ready to be—your wife."

He smiled faintly.

"But—if I am *not* willing, Bee?" he said in a very quiet voice.

She flushed up to the roots of her hair.

"Sit down, dear," he said gently—"and listen to me. I—I can't talk much," he added with a gesture of weariness. "I feel so horribly weak. But—we will speak of this once, and then we will put it away for ever." He paused, and passed his hand across his lips as though to steady them. Then he went on:

"While I thought you had no love for any other man, I was willing to be contented with very little. Because—knowing how dearly I loved you—I hoped that in time, you might come to love me too. But—I will not share my wife's heart with another man. And I will not take advantage of a moment's generosity on your part, by making your whole life miserable. For that is what you would be, my dear. Oh yes, you would"—as she made a quick denying gesture. "You are sorry for me just now, because your tender little heart is touched by my weakness

and generally floored appearance—and all that sort of thing. But—" and here the quiet voice shook a little—'your eyes told me—that day—what your lips could never question——" He stopped suddenly; for a deathly faintness had come over him. But with a strong effort he recovered himself.

"It is nothing—nothing," he said, trying to smile, as Bee bent over him in keen alarm. "I'm so—wretchedly weak still. The least thing—upsets me."

Bee raised his head, and held a glass of wine to his lips. He drank it feverishly.

"Thank you, dear," he murmured as she laid his head back on the pillows again.

For some time he lay quite still, without speaking. He looked so pale and worn, so unlike the gallant *debonnair* Cyril she had known, that Bee's heart smote her keenly. It seemed more than possible to love him—to love him very dearly.

Whilst he was thinking with the wild longing of sick desire—"Ah God! how sweet the touch of her little hands!"

For an instant his head had leaned on her breast.

"Cyril"—she whispered, kneeling beside him—"Cyril—I would try very hard—I would try to make you happy——"

But he interrupted her.

"You could not make me happy—now," he answered. "Let us speak of it no more." His voice was hoarse and broken. God only knew what it cost him to give her up—then.

Silence fell between them again. He did not ask the name of his successful rival. Certainly he never thought of Douglas. He had an idea that it might be Debenham. Well—Debenham seemed a decent enough fellow, he thought wearily.

Lady Northburgh entered the room.

"I think, Cyril, you have talked long enough. You ought to rest now," she said nervously. "Bee—I must send you away."

A swift glance from her son's eyes made her add:

"I shall come back in five minutes." Then she went out again.

"Good-bye," Bee said tremulously.

"Good-bye," he answered, holding her little fingers tightly in his, and speaking in a low spent voice. "God bless you, my dear, and send you all happiness."

A half sob rose in the girl's throat. Happiness? For her? That seemed so likely!

"One moment, Bee," Cyril said with white lips, as she drew her hand away from his. "Dear little one—God only knows when and how we may meet again. Will you kneel down beside me, and let me hold you in my arms—let me kiss your lips just once—just this *once*, Bee—for the memory of what has been between us? Is it—too much to ask?"

But she answered him by flinging herself on her knees beside him, and letting him hold and kiss her as he would. It was no disloyalty to Douglas, she thought hysterically. He did not want her kisses. And her heart told her that she had treated Cyril badly.

He released her almost instantly.

"For God's sake leave me," he muttered, his breath coming in long shuddering sighs.

She went away. And her last memory of him for many a long day was as she saw him then—lying white and still in the dull firelight, his lips rigidly compressed as though in mortal pain, and one thin hand covering his eyes.

* * * * *

It is quite beyond my pen to describe the incredulous rage of old Chandleur when he learned from Bee that her engagement to Sir Cyril was absolutely broken off. He stormed, and swore, and threatened, until he was almost black in the face, and finally (when at the end of a couple of weeks Bee still proved obdurate) announced his intention of interviewing the young man himself.

Accordingly, one day when Cyril (now pretty well emancipated from the bonds of invalidism) was languidly writing letters in his library, the door opened and Mr. Chandleur was announced.

"Good morning, Sir Cyril," said the visitor

gruffly. "I'm glad to see you're getting about again."

"Thanks, yes—I'm nearly off the sick-list now, I think," replied the person addressed, absolutely wondering what the deuce the old fellow wanted. "Er—won't you sit down?"

"Thank you—presently—presently. When I've said what I've got to say," said Mr. Chandleur, taking up a position on the hearthrug with his back to the fire.

Cyril leaned back in his chair and waited.

"I daresay you know very well what I'm here for, Sir Cyril," began the old man, in his most blustering manner.

"Really, I am very sorry," said Cyril courteously—"but I fear I am rather at a loss——"

"Now, I don't want any beating about the bush," broke in the other rudely. "What's all this nonsense I hear about the engagement being broken off between you and my granddaughter? Eh?"

Cyril's haughty impassive face flushed darkly, then became very pale.

"You have heard correctly," he answered in icy tones. "Your grand-daughter and I are no longer engaged."

Mr. Chandleur grew purple.

"What, sir? *What, sir?*" he shouted furiously. "Do you dare to sit there, with your infernally cool face—and tell me you have jilted the girl?"

Cyril's face grew a shade colder, a shade haughtier.

"There has been no question of jilting in the matter," he said in a dangerously quiet voice. "We have come to a mutual understanding on the subject. Miss Adeane does not—does not care for me sufficiently to marry me. Therefore it is better our engagement should end."

"Not care for you sufficiently?" echoed old Chandleur in a transport of rage. "And what of that? What of that, I say? She's got to marry you. It's nothing to me whether she cares for you or not."

"But—if you will pardon me—it is a great deal to me," returned Sir Cyril, still in that

carefully-repressed tone — though he had grown somewhat white about the mouth. "I have no desire to force any woman to marry me."

"Then it's you who has backed out of it!" stormed Mr. Chandleur. "I thought as much! I *thought* as much!—though the little fool tried to shield you by taking the blame on herself. Now, look here, my haughty young lord! You won't get over me with your damned aristocratic airs. You marry my girl within the next month—or by the Lord Harry, I'll have you up for breach of promise!"

Cyril sat transfixed. This! — after his difficult self-sacrifice — his generous withdrawal of all his pretensions. *This!*—after all he had suffered during the last fortnight. Oh—it was intolerable!

Under all his outer calm, Cyril had what some of his friends were wont to call "a devil of a temper." Old Chandleur's next speech called it forth in royal array.

"It's just such snuff-the-moon young Jack-

anapes as you," proceeded the infuriated Chandleur—"that get girls talked about, and leave them on the shelf for all their friends to make a laughing-stock of. Who's going to take your leavings, do you suppose? Eh?"

During this conciliating speech, Cyril had risen, and now advanced deliberately towards his unwelcome guest.

"If you were a younger man," he said in a curiously concentrated voice, "I should thrash you within an inch of your life. As it is—if you give me any more of your damnable insolence, I shall ring for my servants to turn you into the street. How dare you bandy Miss Adeane's name about as you are doing? God knows my dearest wish is to make her my wife—if she cared for me at all. But as she does not—she shall not be forced into marrying me. And she shall not be subjected to persecution and insult because she is too honest and true to give herself where she cannot give her heart. Leave the room, sir!—and the house. I should be sorry to forget that you are an old

man, and that I once had the honour and happiness to be your grand-daughter's accepted husband."

Cyril had lashed himself into a pretty fair passion by this time, and delivered himself of the above speech in a slinging, sledgehammer style that was not without its effect on his listener. For your true bully is almost always a coward as well. And old Chandleur was a bully of the most pronounced type. He had hitherto imagined Sir Cyril to be nothing more than a languid indolent "swell," incapable either of exertion or any particular form of emotion. Now, it suddenly occurred to him that his grand-daughter's whilom *fiancé*, drawn up to his full height, with flashing eyes, and an appearance generally indicative of suppressed fury, looked uncomfortably in earnest, and uncomfortably capable of enforcing his earnestness. He rather thought he had been mistaken in his estimate of this seemingly easy-going young man, whom he had intended to intimidate and bring to his bearings. He coughed

nervously, pulled up his collar, and favoured Sir Cyril with a silent but ferocious glare.

The latter individual went on, making a violent effort to speak calmly :

"Further—I would have you remember that this is a matter entirely between Miss Adeane and myself, and that she shall not be molested and worried about it for the future. I should like you to understand this thoroughly before you go. I have yet to learn that two people can be bullied into marrying each other if both are unwilling—or that such a state of matters would furnish material for a breach of promise case. And now," glancing at his watch, "perhaps you will pardon me if I suggest that this interview should close. I have still several letters to write for this afternoon's post — and I fear I have little enough time. Good morning."

And having rung the bell, and bowed his visitor out, Sir Cyril flung himself into his chair, and proceeded to smoke three cigars in rapid succession. Certainly his letters did

not catch the afternoon's post—nor, as far as I remember, were they written at all that day.

"Confound it all," he muttered, after a while, rising and walking over to the window —"I'm getting into a horribly low, nervous state. Perhaps it's just as well I'm off to-morrow. I suppose those fools of doctors are right; I want a thorough change after that beastly fever."

Now, Cyril was not a sentimental fellow, as a rule; but I am bound to state that at this point he took from his pocket-book a certain photograph, and gazed at it steadfastly for an absurd length of time. Nay, more—he pressed his lips to the smiling girlish face, not once, but many times. When he replaced it tenderly in his pocket-book, his eyes were a trifle misty, and his hand was not quite steady.

And this was Cyril! Calm, self-contained, passionless Cyril!

Ah! you dear, thoughtless, lovable little women! Do you know, I wonder, what

utter fools you can make of us? Do you know the incalculable mischief you do?

I suppose you do know—most of you—too well. Nevertheless, I would say to you —"as you are strong, be merciful!"

END OF VOL. II.

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